Patrick Collinson: *The Birthpangs of Protestant England*
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1. The Protestant Nation

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On the day that war broke out my father heard a London preacher declare that if Hitler were to win he would tear up his Bible (no doubt as strong men occasionally rip up telephone directories). My father was so offended that he resolved never to darken the doors of that church again. The preacher's rhetorical figure and my father's adverse reaction to it are typical of the intricate relationship which the Protestant Reformation established, not so much between church and state (which it both simplified and complicated), or between religion and politics (which was and still is a can of worms), as between God and the Nation; and this is a relationship to which we have scant access except in the rhetoric of the publicist and preacher, in whose mouth it was occasional, opportunistic and even manipulative, playing upon minds, emotions and consciences which may well have been confused but are in any case closed to the historian. Prebendary Colin Kerr of St Paul's Portman Square would not really have torn up his Bible if Germany had successfully invaded England in 1940. He said what he said to make the point that Hitler would not, could not, win. God would not let him. (But my Quaker father was offended, nevertheless, by the sheer presumptuousness of what he said.) Similarly, when seventeenth-century preachers threatened that God was about to desert the nation – 'as sure as God is God, God is going from England' – it is doubtful whether they really meant it. It was a way not only of dramatising the moral danger in which the country stood but also of underlining the special and ultimately secure relationship obtaining between God and at least some of his people. God would not really go from England. Would he?

Well, perhaps. In the Old Testament prophecy of Hosea God pronounces a terrible sentence upon Israel.#3 'Then said God, call his name Lo-ammi, for ye are not my people and I will not be your God.' Commenting on this text, on which numerous English preachers would presently expound, John Calvin said that this was 'a final disowning of Israel . . . For God here abolishes, in a manner, the covenant he made with the holy fathers, so that the people would cease to have any pre-eminence over other nations . . . And then God wholly disinherited them'. But note Calvin's 'in a manner'. The great reformer seems to read the text as God's ultimate stratagem in a last-ditch effort to save a people whose disease was not so much incurable as 'almost incurable'. For, as English preachers would insist, all God's threatenings are conditional, 'to fall upon us if we repent not of our sins'. And so we come to Thomas Hooker, talking about God going from England on the eve of his own departure from Chelmsford, first for Holland and, later, for New England, where his destiny was to lay the foundations of Connecticut, a state of the Union. Hooker played cat and mouse with the very last English congregation he was ever to address: 'Shall I tell you what God told me? Nay, I must tell you on pain of my life . . . What if I should tell you what God told me yesternight, that he would destroy England and lay it waste . . . Well, look to it, for God is going, and if he do go, then our glory goes also.' But then, a moment or two later, he asked: 'How may we keep the Lord? It would be worth our labor.'#4

If the reader is already lost in this little thicket of minor prophecy let him take refuge in a simple statement of three words, words invoked more often than any others to encapsulate what is said to be the protestant perception of God's special dealings with the English nation: GOD IS ENGLISH. They appeared in *An harborowe for faithfull and trewe subiectes*, a book written in 1559 by John Aylmer, some time a tutor of royal and semi-royal personages (much beloved by Lady Jane Grey), a recent protestant exile and a future bishop of London. 'God is English' is a marginal note, pungently summarising the rhetoric of the text: 'Play not the milk sops . . . Show your selves true Englishmen in readiness, courage and boldness: and be ashamed to be the last. Fear neither French nor Scot. For first, you have God and all his army of angels on your side.' 'God is English' still has the capacity to shock as well as to amuse, although it was not an original proposition but a commonplace, an aphorism affirming that England was what a Caroline preacher later called 'the peculiar place of God'. Latimer pronounced: 'Verily God hath shewed himself God of England, or rather the English God'. Lyly proclaimed in *Euphues and his England*: 'The living God is only the English God'. And even the sober Archbishop Matthew Parker could remark: 'Where Almighty God is so much English as he is...'#5

In our enlightened age of ecumenical internationalism these sentiments are quoted in the lecture room to provoke a faint laugh from a jaded audience. It was a joke, or half a joke, in the sixteenth century, just as it raised a smile in the fourteenth century to say 'now the pope has become French, Jesus has become English'. This referred to a gold coin of Edward III which showed on one face the king standing in a ship, sword in hand, and on the other the text: 'But Jesus, passing through the midst of them, went his way'. But to say that something was a joke is not to say that it was not serious. If it really was the case that England was thought to be God's peculiar place, not just an elect nation but the elect nation, and if that idea was born out of the experience of the Protestant Reformation and its immediate consequences, then we have unearthed in protestant religious consciousness a root, perhaps even the taproot, of English imperialism.

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