THE POLITICIZATION OF THE PULPIT IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND: THANKSGIVING SERMONS AFTER THE DUKE OF MONMOUTH'S REBELLION

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I

The last years of Charles II's reign were seriously affected by the growing polarization of English public opinion. However, once the Popish Plot hysteria and the Exclusion Crisis were over,[1] there was a general need —mainly among the nobility and gentry— for peace and order. The Whigs had been discredited, and new laws were now passed against religious dissenters in an attempt to reinforce the government and the official Church. Charles II's illegitimate son, the Duke of Monmouth, had been active throughout these years, promoting himself as a Protestant leader who could save the monarchy from the Catholic threat.[2] His involvement in several plots against his father, and his ensuing exile in the Low Countries in April 1684 anticipated the 1685 rebellion he would lead against the new monarch James II. The insurrection proved a complete failure and Monmouth was imprisoned in the Tower of London on 12 July to be executed three days later.[3]

In order to celebrate James's victory over the conspirators, the English authorities declared an official day for public thanksgiving. A number of sermons were then composed and delivered in different parts of the country, which also offered an opportunity to stand by the new monarch in his line of government. Many of these homilies were printed and published soon afterwards with the purpose of spreading the official version of the events and counteracting any remaining opposition to the

Stuart sovereign. This paper considers a variety of the printed sermons delivered on the occasion, such as Charles Allestree's *A Sermon Preached at Oxford before Sir William Walker, Mayor of the Said City upon the 26th of July* (Oxford, 1685), Obadiah Lee's, *Sermon Preached on Sunday the XXVI of July, 1685* (Wakefield, 1685), Thomas Long's *The Unreasonableness of Rebellion in a Sermon Preached at St. Peters, Exon on the 26th of July, 1685* (London, 1685), Edward Pelling's *A Sermon Preached at Westminster-Abbey on the 26th of July 1685* (London, 1685), John Scott's *A Sermon Preached before the Right Honourable the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London at St Mary le Bow, July 26. 1685* (London, 1685) and John Williams's *A Sermon Preached July 26 1685* […] *in the Parish Churches of St. Mildred's Poultrey and St. Ann's Aldersgate* (London, 1685).

These texts respond to the social disorders which had been caused since the 1670s by radical groups who tried to revive the democratic ideas of the Civil War period in Restoration London. This civic opposition was closely connected to the Whig party during the Exclusion Crisis and had been active since the mid 1670s.[4] Most of these rioters supported Monmouth as the Protestant alternative to James. Hence, the Duke's rebellion only three years later was not an isolated event, but the result of a long period of resistance to the authorities.

These thanksgiving sermons share the same critical attitude towards Monmouth's rebellion and try to convince their respective audiences of the evils of insurrection. They also reproduce many of the arguments that had been previously employed by the Tories in alliance with the government to discredit the Whig opponents of James's succession. They thus participate in the controversies that both political factions had developed a few years before and assume the official position that had permitted James's succession to the throne. Although the difficult question of James's Catholicism is referred to in practically all these texts, only two of the preachers seem to point out the monarch's possible responsibility. This is the case with Thomas Long and John Williams, who delivered their sermons in Exeter, Poultry and Aldersgate, respectively. The town of Exeter, in the South-West of England, had supported the rebellion against James, while Poultry and Aldersgate were close to Cheapside, in the heart of the city of London, where many pro-Monmouth disturbances had taken place in 1682. These sermons addressed to such prejudiced brethren no doubt implied a different response to the official program on the part of both the preachers and the congregation.

II

In general terms, the preachers organize their speech around two main subjects: God's Providence in preserving England from the rebels, and the condemnation of rebellion and regicide. With regard to the first, Monmouth's defeat makes clear

God's position towards those who do not respect his authority. Rebellion is described as useless and doomed to fail as it challenges divine prerogatives:

> This ought to caution us not to engage our selves in any Factious, Disloyal or Rebellious design against our Prince and Government; because in so doing, we take the most effectual course that it's possible for men to do, to oblige the Almighty Providence of Heaven to fight against us. For there is no one sin in all the black Catalogue of the works of darkness, which God is more concerned to punish in this life, than this of Treason and Rebellion. (Scott 1685: 23)[5]

Those who follow rebels are portrayed as ignorant and blind subjects unable to see they are walking towards their self-destruction (Lee 1685: 15; Long 1685: 13, 19).[6] The conspirators themselves are demonized and shown as malicious, sanguinary evil spirits unwilling to submit to any established order and therefore, dangerous for the general welfare. Their arguments for rebellion —religion and liberty— are here discredited as proofs of their pride and falsity:

> And where men have no regard to God and Religion, what will they not adventure upon, though it be to their own destruction? And therefore having the example of so many pious, good and wise Kings Rebell'd against, and that under the fair disguise of Piety, Religion and Liberty it may make us the less wonder that such there should be in our days. (Lee 1685: 14)[7]

Religious arguments are used, instead, to condemn rebellion under the threat of eternal damnation and to forestall any possible link between regicide and Protestantism: "And in Conformity to this, are the Confessions of Faith in all the Protestant and Reformed Churches, from which there can nothing be drawn, that will justifie Opposition or Rebellion against Civil Authority; but they expressly declare against it" (Williams 1685: 22-23).[8]

This discourse, nevertheless, can turn problematic when it is used to praise the obedient subjects instead of the monarch. Thomas Long, for instance, refers in Exeter to the need to obey even heathenish or evil kings, since they may have been sent by God to check his people's loyalty:

> Though a King may be a Heathen, he is Gods anointed; and though they call themselves the godly people that oppose him, God counts them but Heathen […] yet must the people be subject to them with all fear, this being a duty worthy of thanks, if a man for conscience towards God endure grief, though he suffer wrongfully, I Pet. 2. 18, 19. For if we do well (i.e.) live in obedience and subiection, and suffer for it patiently, this is acceptable to God. (Long 1685: 5)

The allusions to Christ's and the apostles' submission to Pilate or Nero, as well as to King David's loyalty to Saul (Long 1685: 5-7) highlight the contradictions of James II's image as a tyrannical monarch.

The same problematic position appears in John William's homily in the parish churches of St. Mildred's Poultrey and St. Ann's Aldersgate when he criticizes resorting to evil for a good cause (Williams 1685: 8-9). Though the preacher attacks rebellion and exposes the general confusion and uncertainty it can generate, the absence of any explicit condemnation of the rebels' purpose is revealing and may imply some sympathy with their cause. The fact that the author decided to publish his sermon in order to defend his reputation and to silence the accusations against him for not delivering a proper homily for the day, reveals the complex reception his words could have provoked:

> I haue already appealed to my Superiours as my Iudg; to you [his audience and readers] as my witnesses: To them whether the matter be either true in it self, or fitted to the occasion: To you whether it be the sermon I preached. I cannot expect that euen the most attentive should remember euery particular then delivered; but I am confident, that you will be able generally to say, that this was the sermon I at that time entertained you with. And if this be so (as so it is) then I need say no more, to answer those that haue too rashly censured and traduced it as not at all suitable to the occasion it was Preached upon. (Williams 1685: A4r-A4v)

However, this is not the common attitude of the ministers, who generally understand Monmouth's defeat as a sign of God's support of James's legitimacy. They are aware, nonetheless, of the paradoxical position of a Catholic king as the head of the Anglican Church, but insist on the need to trust James's promise to preserve the Protestant settlement:

> We cannot therefore have any colour to doubt of the continuation of our Religion, or suspect the faithfulness of that Declaration, which of his meer Grace and voluntary motion, he was pleas'd upon his first coming to the crown to make to his Honourable Privy Council, and renewed again in the same Terms in a greater solemnity, before the Three Estates assembled in Parliament. (Allestree 1685: 16-17)[9]

God's help to the Stuart monarch is interpreted as a reason for obeying the sovereign so the principle of submission to superiors prevails over any religious difference.

Another way to authorize James's position is through his comparison to King David, a model of pious and just king in the Old Testament who also had to endure several insurrections. The first of them, by Sheba, a discontented subject who brought about a civil war in Israel and was providentially killed by a woman who deceived him and cut his head off while he was sleeping (Allestree 1685: 3; Pelling 1685: 4-6).[10] The possible associations between this biblical figure and contemporary Englishmen involved in several plots against the monarch, such as the Earl of Argyll[11] or the Earl of Shaftesbury,[12] are not openly developed, though

they would probably remain in the mind of the audience. However, the clearest parallelism between the Bible and England's current situation would be found in the rebellion of Absalom against his father, King David. Absalom's ingratitude, pride and ambition are compared to Monmouth's, who also went on exile and manipulated the disaffected people abroad and at home with the intention of deposing the rightful sovereign (Pelling 1685: 4-7; Lee 1685: 4-7).

The figure of Absalom had been used with this same meaning since the early Jacobean period and had been explicitly associated with the Duke of Monmouth in some works published after his return from Utrecht in November 1679.[13] Among these texts, Dryden's narrative poem *Absalom and Achitophel*, a sharp criticism on the Whig party during the Exclusion Crisis, had been extremely popular and widely read, thus contributing to the mechanical identification between the two protagonists of the poem and contemporary political figures, such as the Protestant Duke and Shaftesbury. In fact, Pelling's sermon employs the same analogies to attack Shaftesbury's influence on Monmouth, though the latter's responsibility is never minimized. Hence, the monarch's nephew is shown as an instrument of the interests of the Whig factions and as a victim of those discontented masses of people he had tried to manipulate:

> Some people even against demonstration, will have that which makes for their interest, and suits best to their inclinations, pass for truth; or at least they will lay hold of it and embrace it as such, because it may contribute to promote their Revenge and Ambition, or advance some other secular concernment: So that when the misguided Prince had suck'd in these false principles, and landed in the West to make good his claim, his Abetters flock'd to him in so great shoals & numbers, & saluted him with such chearfulness and acclamations of joy, that in a very little time he grew so strong, that neither he nor any of his followers dreaded the event of the War, or apprehended a defeat of so numerous a body of Men, of proportionable courage and Resolution. (Allestree 1685: 24-25)

The divided interests of such a heterogeneous army —composed, according to some preachers, of malcontents, mercenary foreign powers and radical sects—, are also presented as a main cause of their failure. Despite their strength, their lack of union and cooperation was fatal. The threat they represented was not over, though, and seemed to reveal some anxiety about the growing number of disaffected people and the alleged support of the rebels by the ordinary forces (Pelling 1685: 15-16). In spite of the ministers' attempts at minimizing the enemy's power, the allusions to contemporary popular unrest were unavoidable (Long 1685: 20).

In order to silence commentaries of this sort which may disturb the audience, the preachers tried to unite their listeners against any insurrection that could bring about not just the government's fall, but complete chaos. Memories of the social disorders in the aftermath of the Popish Plot would have come to the minds of the

congregation. In fact, even after the plot had been discredited, the anti-Catholic paranoia continued to spread and there had been serious riots in the streets of London (Cressy 1989: 183). Consequently, the preacher in effect involved his congregation in the preservation of their country and constantly reminded them of the horrors of rebellion —atheism, confusion, perpetual war, weakness and division— as these could offer a perfect opportunity for any foreign power to invade England. The rebels' main charges against the monarchy —irreligion and arbitrary government— are thus turned against them:

> Now what a Load and oppression of Grief must there needs have been upon the Spirits of the present Generation of Men in the late REBELS success […] Majesty it self and the Royal Dignity must have been Sacrific'd, and trodden under Foot. All the religious parts of our Devotion would have been prostituted to His, and his Accomplices superstitious Avarice; the Revenue of the Church must have been alienated, and made an Oblation to his greedy Appetite and Sacrilegious Desire. All the properties of the Subject would have been expos'd, and lain wholly at the mercy of these Invaders. The Liberties of a Free-born People would have been Subject to his Arbitrary Will and pleasure […] (Allestree 1685: 33)[14]

The memories of the Civil War are revived in order to warn Englishmen against repeating past mistakes. Hence, the sense of menace and the need to be permanently watchful are always present (Williams 1685: 20-21). Some preachers even took the opportunity to honour Charles I's memory and describe his execution as a sacrifice for the welfare of his nation. His death is then seen as God's lesson to England so they may understand and act against the plotters' wickedness:

> It is true (a most sad and shameful Truth, God knows) such was the monstrous impiety of the Last Age, that it afforded one unpresidented, unparallel'd instance of Gods wrath, when that imparable Monarch, the Glory of our Reformation, and the Honour of the World, was forced to bow his head down, and to fall a Sacrifice to the Lusts of the most barbarous Villains, as if God had forsaken him. Yet I cannot tell, but that God, who draweth Good many times out of the greatest Evil, did in that terrible juncture design to shew men the excessive sinfulness of their Follies, in throwing away a Felicity, always to be reflected on, but hardly ever to be recover'd to the Worlds End. (Pelling 1685: 11-12)

By discrediting the actions and motives of the Civil War rebels, the preachers appeal to the audience's capacity to discover and reject similar attitudes in the present. In so doing, they would understand the need to punish them all in order to ensure an everlasting peace for the English nation. Thus, the advantages of a peaceful settlement perfectly justify the conspirators' execution:

> in the Affluence of peace, we may […] enjoy a cheerful serenity, and participate of all the Desirable blessings that God and Nature can furnish us with, whilst all the

> world around us is in Darkness and Confusion. The Land prospers and flowes with milk and hony, Commerce and Trade are improv'd, the reputation of a Nation exalted, the Sacred person of our King rever'd at home, and ador'd abroad for his Grandure and Magnificence, the honour of God & his Religion promoted, and the great business of Devotion carry'd quietly on without interruption or molestation […]. (Allestree 1685: 29)

Finally and typically of the last part in the structure of any sermon, the English are called upon to repent and lead a godly life to secure God's favour.[15] In fact, some authors interpret Monmouth's insurrection as a punishment for England's irreligious attitude and stress the need to reform manners as a condition sine qua non for not enraging the Almighty.[16] This didactic and moral tone encourages the listeners to make a Christian use of the rebellion and to consider it a lesson or a warning from God to change:

> And yet I may say truly, but to our great shame, that since the Creation of the Universe there never was such an Atheistical generation, no not in the most dark, in the most distant, in the most infidel parts of the World, as this Nation hath groaned under of late years. And yet 'tis observable, though it be very strange that none among us have pretended greater concernment for the Reformation, for the interest, for the security of our establisht Religion than those who have bid open defiance to all Religion whatsoever […] In which respect God was so kind and good to those his Enemies too, that he made their very Punishment to instruct them, and took a direct course to convince the Atheist by defeating, and plaguing, and delivering up the Traytor. (Pelling 1685: 23-24)

III

In conclusion, these thanksgiving texts exemplify the continuing politicization of the English sermon in the seventeenth century, when the religious discourse began to be used as a vehicle for political debates about tyranny, regicide and rebellion. After the Civil War and the Restoration the country experienced a deep process of division into increasingly opposed groups, and sermon literature became a useful instrument to create and influence public opinion. These thanksgiving homilies stand as an example of how they could support official discourses without fully abandoning, in certain cases, a critical and even resentful attitude towards the authorities.

The works considered also exemplify the alliance between the Anglican establishment and the Tory faction in the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis and the early years of James's reign, when both collaborated to isolate the Whigs and prevent any radical attack against the monarchy. These preachers were more or less

compelled to involve their brethren in the new project of the nation started with James II, and to a certain extent, they were successful. James's problems would start not long after when he departed from this alliance. In fact, the image of order invoked in these sermons would turn against the sovereign in 1688 when similar arguments would be used to justify his deposition.

Notes

[1]. The Popish Plot (1678-1681) was an alleged Catholic conspiracy invented by two English clergymen named Titus Oates and Israel Tongue. According to them, there was an international Catholic alliance led by France and the Jesuits, who intended to depose Charles II and replace him with his Catholic brother, the Duke of York. Dissenters rushed to support the Whigs, who won a majority in the House of Commons. On 11 May 1679, Anthony Ashley Cooper, first Earl of Shaftesbury, introduced the Exclusion Bill in the House of Commons with the intention of preventing a Catholic succession to the English throne. Charles dissolved Parliament and subsequent attempts to pass the bill were equally frustrated. The Whigs responded with a propaganda campaign designed to involve the whole country in support of the exclusion. They mostly used the hysteria produced by the Popish Plot to provoke a general reaction against a Catholic successor, but by 1681, it was discovered that Oates and Tongue had lied and the Whigs' popularity soon declined. The mass movement against the Duke of York was then over and the bill was defeated in the House of Lords. On the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis, see Kenyon 2001; Knights 1994; De Krey 2005: 157–331; Harris 1987, 1993: 80–116; Green 1977; Jones 1961; and Miller 1973: 154–88.

[2]. In fact, Monmouth was supported by many opponents to James's succession, who used to further the Duke's cause in public demonstrations, such as those on 5 and 17 November, two key dates in the Protestant calendar being the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot and Queen Elizabeth's day, respectively. On Monmouth's popularity in contemporary London, see Harris 1987: 115–117, 124, 158–61 and De Krey 2005: 181–182.

[3]. For further information about Monmouth's rebellion, see Clifton 1984 and Earle 1978.

[4]. At this time, most radical groups were formed by nonconformists protesting against the enforcement of penal laws against them. During the Exclusion Crisis, however, Charles's pro-French policy, his attempts to control parliament, the promotion of a standing army and the Duke of York's conversion to Catholicism contributed to the alliance between those dissenters and the Whig party, who made use of petitioning campaigns, illegal printing and mass anti-Catholic demonstrations to declare their fierce opposition to government measures (De Krey 1990, Harris 2001: 205–207, Miller 1995: 360–367).

[5]. John Scott (1638/9-1695) was a Church of England clergyman, appointed prebendary at St. Paul's in March 1685, by which time he had gained a reputation for preaching and had strong links with important Tories in London (Ginn 2004).

[6]. Thomas Long (1621-1707) had become the prebendary of Exeter Cathedral in 1660. He was a prolific writer, especially against dissenters and in favour of passive obedience (Chamberlain 2004a).

[7]. No doubt the preacher is responding here to the demands of many dissenters for further reformation in the Church

of England. Indeed, these groups considered the government's persecutions as an assault upon English liberties. The fact that Monmouth's army was largely composed of nonconformists is relevant to understand the ideological basis of his rebellion and the counter-arguments the Anglican preachers used against them. On the appeal to English liberties by Monmouth's supporters, see De Krey 1996: 234–235, 238.

8. John Williams (1633-1709) had been a prolific writer and controversialist clearly committed to the Protestant cause. In the early 1680s he had favoured the Exclusion Bill, though he showed no sympathy for rebels either at the time of Monmouth's insurrection or in the 1688 rebellion (Chamberlain 2004c).

9. Allestree is implicitly alluding here to the legalist arguments which had been used by the Tory faction during the Exclusion Crisis. According to them, King Charles II was doing everything legally and so the subjects were compelled to obey the Crown and respect succession. In this case, James had legally occupied the throne of England and he had promised to keep the Protestant religion. Up to this moment, he had done no wrong and therefore could not be deposed. On the use of the legalist argument by the Tories in the late 1670s, see Harris 1993: 96–101.

10. Edward Pelling (1640-1718) had become a prebendary of Westminster in 1683. As J. S. Chamberlain explains, "he defended divine-right monarchy, indefeasible hereditary right, and passive obedience". However and despite his disagreement with the Whig arguments for exclusion, he became the new majesties' chaplain in the early 1690s (Chamberlain 2004b).

11. Argyll landed in Scotland in May 1685 and published a declaration against James II's legitimacy. Soon after that his army was suppressed by royal troops. He was captured and executed in Edinburgh without trial.

12. Shaftesbury (1621-1683) had been concerned with the threat of a Catholic succession from the late 1670s and became one of the main promoters of the three Exclusion Bills proposed to Charles II in the last years of his reign. He had also organized a petitioning campaign against King Charles's successive prorogations of parliament in 1679-1680. As a result, he was arrested on 2 July 1681 on the charge of high treason, but was finally declared not guilty. On his role in the Exclusion Crisis, see Knights 1994: 16–28, 92–103, 112–44 and De Krey 2005: 182–83, 193.

13. See the anonymous *A Letter to his Grace the D. of Monmouth, this 15th of July, 1680* (London, 1680), *Absalom's Conspiracy; or the Tragedy of Reason* (London, 1680) and John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (London, 1681). On the use of this biblical character in the seventeenth century, see Swedenberg 1972: 230–33.

14. The minister may be implicitly alluding here to the arguments employed by the Tories against the theory of the ancient constitution. According to them, the king had never signed a contract with his people and was only accountable to God for his actions (Harris 1993: 96–98).

15. The image of a sinful world to be righted through an alliance between ruler, ministers and subjects had frequently appeared in English sermons since the second half of the sixteenth century. They all insisted on the need for a general repentance and reformation to improve the present state of affairs. For the use of the motif of the sinful city in Early Modern English sermons, see Lake and Questier 2002: 335–60.

16. The reform of morals had always been associated with the Apocalyptic rhetoric and the sermon genre. Moral reformation as part of a political program to ensure the nation's safety had also been proposed since the early seventeenth century by King James and moderate Anglican authors. After the Glorious Revolution in 1688, it would be further developed by the Whigs to promote the new Orangist regime. This motif was increasingly politicized by the end of the century and became a basic point in the political agenda of Tories and Whigs in the Augustan Age. On this topic, see Burtt 1995 and Hayton 1990.

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Received: 10 March 2008
Revised version: 11 February 2009