17th Century Religion

The Religious Challenge

The rising tide of religious dissent had a very noticeable impact in Austrey and the surrounding villages after the Civil War. Before 1650 religious sectarianism was largely contained within the church. After the outbreak of the Civil War the activities of the radical sects intensified, becoming more and more identified with demands for social and political change. Temporarily relaxed censorship after 1640 provided a unique forum for the airing of these millenarian ideas It is interesting to see how the Austrey clergy and their congregations coped with these religious challenges, and how it affected the villagers.

Christopher Hill has described the period from 1645 to 1653 as ‘a period of glorious flux and intellectual excitement’. The parish clergy had already seen a series of drastic organisational changes brought in by Parliament in an attempt to suppress Arminianism. These included the abolition of episcopacy in 1643, the imposition of sanctions against use of the prayer book and the establishment of a directory of worship in 1644. The righteous clamour of radical sects like the Diggers, Ranters and Levellers for more substantial changes increased religious uncertainty and provoked new challenges to the foundations of the social order. Although the threatened 'revolt within the revolution' collapsed under the weight of the conservative backlash before 1660, the revolutionary religious ideas which sustained those who wanted to 'turn the world upside down' remained potentially dangerous forces.

Ordinary villagers’ wills

While the attitudes of clergy and gentry may often be inferred from written evidence - commonplace books, diaries, visitations, and the contents of clerical libraries - the religious beliefs and attitudes of ordinary inhabitants are seldom recorded except in preambles to wills. Unfortunately, religious statements in wills do not always reflect the testator's personal beliefs. Wills drawn up by professional scribes often follow a set formula or reflect the faith of the scrivener rather than that of the testator. However, less conventional expressions of faith can usually be relied upon to capture the essence of personal belief. Early wills from Austrey reveal a strong and simple piety permeating all ranks of the social order. Those drawn up before 1560 contain the standard Catholic clauses. After the mid sixteenth-century Reformation the testators gradually abandon references to Mary and the Saints. References to personal salvation, penitence and the expunging of sin in about a quarter of the wills suggest that there was a strong 'Protestant' or Calvinist element in the parish, especially among some of the yeomen. Other colourful visions of the afterlife seem to owe their inspiration to radical sermons and texts. William Beck for example thought that his soul would be ‘carried by the blessed angels in heaven’ while his body suffered ‘soft corruption in the grave’, the two to be later united ‘coupled and joined together in the kingdom of glory to reign in heaven and unspeakable blessedness with God’ (1626).

Toleration and religious conflict

The variations in religious imagery, unreliable though they may be as a guide to individual belief, suggest a broad spectrum of religious attitudes ranging from orthodox Anglicanism to radical nonconformity, but the dominant strand could probably be described as 'moderately puritan'. Religious

differences did not necessarily cause conflict before the Civil War. Neighbourly toleration even extended to Catholics, as is suggested, for example, by the presentment of Joseph Mould of Appleby before the Bishop of Lincoln's consistory court at Melton in 1635 on a charge of allowing Mary Foster, the wife of his recusant neighbour, to attend upon his own wife during her confinement. Prosecutions for nonconformity were nonexistent or rare before 1640. Dissent in Austrey was probably kept in check by the parish's geographical isolation, the continuing stability of the social order and the comparative illiteracy of the ordinary inhabitants.

However, from the late Tudor period onwards, radical religious ideas gained increasing currency through the sermons and prophesysings of radical preachers in centres like Ashby, Atherstone and Nuneaton. In the early 1570s the inhabitants of villagers were probably influenced, to some extent at least, by the puritan clergy in the local market towns. Their spiritual leader, the schoolmaster, Anthony Gilby, vented strong opposition to the established church. His spiritual successor, Arthur Hildersham, the vicar of Ashby, helped to promote the Puritan millenary petition. Sir George Hastings purchase of the living at Measham in 1581 and the presentment of Peter Egleshall as vicar, brought dissent even closer to Austrey's doorstep. Even if they wanted to, the local vicars were powerless to prevent the proliferation of radical sects in surrounding towns and villages or to curb the clamour of dissent against the established church within their own parish.

Sources and Notes

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Presbyterians and unlicenced preachers

The Austrey incumbent played a comparatively minor part in religious controversy. His office, already weakened by the loss of the tithes was further undermined by sequestration which (temporarily at least) deprived the vicar of his two leases in Hollywell Brook and Leasemoor Field. Here the main challenge after the Civil War came from the Presbyterians and the Quakers. The Presbyterians remained within the church, disputing only the form of church government. The earliest evidence of their presence in Austrey is contained by the episcopal returns of 'conventicles' which record that they regularly met in Henry Kendall's house. Providing meeting places in their homes was quite common practice among sympathetic local gentry. Thomas Dowley, who was ejected from the living at Elford in Staffordshire, used his own house in Newton Regis as a meeting place in 1669. His son Richard, following in his father's steps, later preached at Orton possibly staying with Thomas Hill at the Lea Grange. When their licences were revoked some preachers even resorted to stratagems to gain an audience, as for example when Tixell Perry tricked the rector into allowing him to preach a sermon in Appleby Church.

Ejected divines were the most active local preachers of the 1660s and 1670s and their ejections probably encouraged the spread of dissent into neighbouring parishes. Thomas Hill and Richard Dowley, the vicars of Orton and Stoke Prior, who were both ejected for nonconformity, were perhaps typical. Following his ejection from the living at Orton in 1672, Hill retired to his house at the Lea Grange (within Orton parish) where he preached to small numbers of his followers. Palmer relates that, when the Five Mile Act came into force be left his family 'and was entertained at a friend's house from whence he went to a gentleman's house about a mile off'. The evidence is sufficient to indicate

that he was taken in by Henry Kendall, who later appointed him his overseer in his will. When George Kendall, Henry's elderly uncle, moved to neighbouring Appleby he continued to be a thorn in the side of the church, suffering excommunication in 1672 along with a certain Robert Jackson for ‘continuing to blaspheme’ against the church.

The People of ‘the Word’

After the Civil War the Quakers succeeded the Ranters as the chief threat to the established social order, promoting what seemed to many a dangerous, radical and alien ideology. Their leader, George Fox, a native of the border region between Leicestershire and Warwickshire, carried his interpretation of ‘the Word’ from here to other parts:

The Truth sprang up first to us so as to be a people of the Lord in Leicestershire in 1644, in Warwickshire in 1645, in Nottinghamshire in 1646, in Derbyshire in 1647 and in the adjacent counties in 1648, 1649 and 1650.

Unlike the presbyterians and others who were accomodated within the established church, the Quakers deliberately set themselves apart from the communal order. They further emphasised their separateness by a refusal to swear oaths of allegiance and by upholding a claim that scripture could only be interpreted through the 'inner spirit', and not by any outside authority. This was an especially dangerous idea. In common with other radical groups, such as Ranters and Diggers, they had particular appeal to the poorer sort of people, especially to cottage craftworkers and labourers, although converts were drawn from all ranks of society in the early years. Although they have been described as ‘the dregs of the common people', they were originally supported by gentry, yeomen and craftsmen.

By 1654 the Quakers were strongly entrenched in North Warwickshire. Fox records large gatherings of the sect at Shuttington, Tamworth and Baddesley Ensor in north Warwickshire. The earliest sign of Quaker activity in the vicinity of Austrey however was in 1653 when Richard Farmer, a Quaker, is said to have attempted to read a 'Christian exhortation' to the townspeople of Twycross. The nervousness of the local gentry in the face of this challenge is revealed in their haste to arrest and imprison him before he had even finished his speech. By 1660 Leicester gaol is said to have housed as many as twenty-five Quaker 'Fanaticks', most of them poor men imprisoned for failure to pay fines, for attending illegal meetings or for refusing to swear oaths.

Sources and Notes

For George Kendall’s excommunication see L.R.O. Archdeaconry court, 1D41/4/XVIII/24. Mould avowed Kendall was one of his parishioners whom be 'seldom seeth ... at his parish church...upon a lords day'. 1D41/4/XXXVI/123.

G.L. Turner, Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence (London, 1911) II, pp. 756, 788, III, pp. 353. Calamy’s 'Account of the Ministers Ejected and Silenced' in S. Palmer (ed.) Nonconformists' Memorial, III, 347; In 1690 Timothy Fox, ex-rector of Drayton Basset (Staffs.) and Richard Southwell, curate of Wilnecote, preached monthly at Appleby: A.G. Matthews, Calamy Revised (Oxford, 1934), 211, 452.

For Tixell Perry, L.R.O. Archdeaconry Court Proceedings, 1D41/XXXVI/123.

P.R.O. E 121/5/1; VCR Warws, I, pg. 42.

C. Hill, World Turned Upside Down, 99; B. Reay, 'The Social Origins of Early Quakerism', JIH, xi No. 1 (Summer, 1980), 55, 62.
George Fox cited in R. Clark, 'Why was the Re-establishment of the Church of England in 1662 Possible? Derbyshire, a provincial perspective', Midland History, 8 (1983), 92.
'Christian exhortation' in Journal of George Fox, cited in Hughes, thesis, pg 436.
J. Besse, Collection of the Sufferings of the People Called Quakers for the Testimony of a Good Conscience (London, 1753) I, pg. 330.[/colapsed]

The returns of conventicles

The Compton census provides a conservative estimate of the extent of nonconformity in Austrey by 1676 recording nine nonconformists, eight of whom are described as Quakers. Adjacent parishes also record dissenting minorities. In the hamlet of Warton in Polesworth 22 nonconformists comprised four per cent of adult males, in Shuttington 12 nonconformists made up fifteen per cent of the total and in the combined townships of Grendon and Whittington, near Tamworth, 18 nonconformists were nine per cent of the adult males. (Appleby records no recusants or nonconformists despite returns of conventicles within the parish in 1672, 1689 and 1692). The Quakers' impulse towards martyrdom and their spurning of help from their neighbours, proved particularly intractable, encouraging the authorities to persecution and harassment.

From Easter 1679 to Epithany 1685 a group of Austrey inhabitants were repeatedly brought before the Justices of the Peace at Warwick to answer charges of absence from church. The Austrey Quakers were noticeably poorer than the presbyterians, who were comparatively more literate, wealthy and well connected. Four of the five Quaker householders are described as husbandmen, the remaining one was a weaver. One of the Austrey householders questioned by the justices was Richard Hinks who was probably related to the Quaker 'Fanatick' Peter Hinks, imprisoned in Leicester gaol in 1660.

Attempts at suppression were ineffective. The long-term influence first of repression and then of Toleration was the growth of apathy and sectarianism. By 1708 the parson of Austrey was complaining that many of his parishioners 'neither come to church nor go to any other place of religious worship'. Having successfully challenged the church on this issue many inhabitants appear to have decided to dispense with Sunday attendance altogether.

Religious dissent emerges as a virulent agency of social change within Austrey and the surrounding parishes. The religious disputes exposed a raw nerve of religious and ideological conflict. While dissent was largely contained within the parish it was a greater threat to the traditional order than the Civil War because it aroused deeper and more lasting antagonisms. Whereas the confrontation between king and parliament posed a sudden threat to life and property which helped to strengthen rather than weaken social ties, religious dissent threatened to divide the inhabitants in irreconcilable postures. Outside persecution, as in the case of the Austrey Quakers, merely hardened these divisions. Although complete social disintegration was averted and the dissenters accomodated in the more tolerant religious climate after 1700, the social order suffered shocks from which it did not fully recover, old habits of subservience were undermined. The subsequent history of the parish reflects attitudes which can no longer be described as either traditional or parochial.

Sources and Notes

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