

CHAPTER 6

REFORM OF RELIGION

When the Reformation hit England in the reign of Henry VIII there were some people who wanted the complete eradication of every vestige of the Roman church such as idolatry, the worship of images and statues, praying to saints, transubstantiation in the eucharist, an altar as opposed to a communion table, crossing oneself, bowing at the name of Jesus, gaudy garments, bishops and above all, papal authority. The latter had been dealt with by Henry and many of the others had been achieved in the reign of his son, Edward VI, by Protector Somerset. Queen Mary put everything into reverse with the execution of many 'martyrs' who would not revert to Rome. In Elizabeth's reign the pendulum swung back to moderate reform and by the end of her reign the Church on England was thought to be Calvinistic, though William Fuller of Cambridge told her the Church was 'but halfly reformed'. The next reaction set in with the arrival of King Charles and his appointment of Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud introduced some high church or Arminian practices, altars were placed at the east end of churches and railed off, the communion service came to resemble the Roman mass, the bishops became autocratic and the ecclesiastical courts of Star Chamber and High Commission (used in Elizabeth's time to persecute Recusants) were used to persecute anyone who chose to criticise Laud's 'innovations'. Prynne, Bastick and Burton were the most famous, but honest John Lilburn did not escape. It had long been the custom that the Church Synod would only assemble while Parliament was sitting, but Charles ordered that the Synod should assemble in the gap between the Short and Long Parliaments and make new church laws (canons); were these legitimate? They were certainly objectionable. These were the 'grievances' which the new Parliament was to address.

There can be no doubt that Hampden had puritan leanings. According to Lord Nugent he sometimes absconded from his own parish church to go to a church where there was a better preacher, and was arraigned by Laud's chancellor for doing so. Subsequent events seem to support his Puritanism.

On 6th November 1640 it was ordered that "A committee of the whole House for religion to meet every Monday at 2 of the clock in the afternoon in the House"¹. They were not slow. They then created sub-committees such as for petitions, for persecuted ministers, for licensing publications, church courts, identifying papists and others. On 26th November there was a long debate on the legality of the recently enacted canons. Most thought they were illegal and not binding on the person; Parliament would confirm no canons made against the law of the land. On 11th December a petition signed by 1,500 Londoners against bishops, deans and their tyrannical government containing 10 clauses from which "grow all our miseries" was read in the House².

On 23rd January 1641 Sir Robert Harley delivered a petition subscribed by "1,000 ministers and other their brethren in the Church of England against the present misgovernment in the Church and her errors both in matters of doctrine and discipline"³.

On the 22nd March Hampden in the House moved that they should consider that clause in the ministers' petition relating to Deans and Chapters⁴. On May 21st he moved that "that ministers at their admission to holy orders or institution into livings might only be tied without any other oath or subscription to be required of them as are required by the statutes of this realm. And...ought not do or execute any power except such as is warranted by the statutes of this realm"⁵. This was because the canons passed illegally contained certain oaths. On May 27th he moved for the commitment of the Bill for the abolition of the church hierarchy which received its second reading this day;⁶ it also provided that "all (ecclesiastical) manors, lands etc shall be dispossessed as the King's Majesty, Lords temporal, and Commons shall appoint, and that all ecclesiastical jurisdiction may be put into such hands as this King and parliament shall think fit"⁷. Four days later Hampden moved that "the report touching the canons shall be made tomorrow morning at 8 of the clock"⁸. In the end this was delayed till the 7th June. On this morning he moved that a message should be sent to the Lords concerning the canons; "that this House does desire that their Lordships would deliver such examinations as were taken by the committee of their House in the presence of some of our House to the end that we may proceed

to trial”⁹. He received a reply that they had not yet had the examinations, but would report back. In the afternoon Sir William Armine went to the Lords requesting a joint conference. Two days previously Hampden had announced to the House that Pym was ill, and as he was chairing the committee for drawing up impeachment proceedings against the Archbishop of Canterbury, and as Pym had given Hampden all the relevant papers, some members, including Hampden, were appointed to “expedite the same”. Probably Hampden took the chair.

On July 23rd 1641 Hampden produced in the House a pamphlet entitled “The order and form for church government by bishops and clergy of this kingdom”¹⁰. It was referred to the committee for printing.

These matters seemed to rest until late in 1641 when 12 bishops who had been instrumental in enacting the illegal canons in May 1640 were impeached by the Commons; this was referred to the Lords. On 30th December the bishops replied with a petition to the King claiming that they were only doing their duty, they abominated popery, and that they had been assailed by the mob while trying to attend parliament. On 17th January 1642 they came to the House of Lords and “kneeling at the bar” pleaded not guilty as charged, they were remanded in custody awaiting trial.¹¹ The trial began on 19th February. Glyn, conducting the case for the Commons, declared that he “did not wish to hang 12 bishops but to confiscate their estates”¹². Meanwhile, on the same day the Commons gave a second reading to a bill for “suppressing innovations and pluralities and for taking away the rails, pictures and other images” which was referred to a committee including Hampden.¹³ And so it continued; on 4th May the Act against the 12 bishops was passed and various other bills and Acts came before both houses but by this time Hampden was busy elsewhere.

But another major measure arising out of these events was that on 9th May 1642 the Commons debated the possibility of convening an assembly of clergy by Act of Parliament to discuss the settling of religion in the realm. This was quickly agreed, the Lords concurred and by the 19th the Act was engrossed, and some of the clergy named. This became the famous Westminster Assembly of Divines, the author of the Westminster Confession (still revered in many non-conformist churches today), the Directory for Worship and the establishment of the Presbyterian Church Order. Of course, all this was put into reverse after 1660, with the Act of Uniformity of 1662 and the Great Ejection on St Bartholomew’s Day. The Anglican Church is still not a ‘reformed church’.