

# THE POLITICAL IDEALS OF THE COVENANTERS, 1660-88

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## I

IN a letter to Lauderdale, the saintly Leighton once spoke of the "unworthy and trifling contentions" of the later Covenanting period in Scotland as little better than "a drunken scuffle in the dark."<sup>1</sup> And this superior and detached verdict has been endorsed by a school of historical writers and *littérateurs*. To the members of this school, the Covenanters, and perhaps more especially the later Covenanters, were sour and disagreeable fanatics, interested only in ecclesiastical trifles—impracticable, other-worldly visionaries. Above all, the Covenanters are singled out for special censure because they—the contemptible, impracticable fanatics—dared to interfere in politics and to criticise the policies of the Stewart kings and their opportunist advisors.

But the writers of this type have arrived at this utterly jaundiced estimate of the Covenanters because, like Leighton, they have missed the true inwardness of the Covenanting struggle. As I have contended in *The Covenanters under Persecution*, "the persecution of the later Covenanters was essentially a political persecution. It is a profound mistake to contend that the struggle was a religious one, or even an ecclesiastical one in its essence."<sup>2</sup> The dominating fact in European politics during the seventeenth century was the struggle between the conflicting ideals of personal Absolutism and popular rights. The break-up of the Holy Roman Empire had resulted in the emergence of the sovereign states. The rulers of these states, freed from allegiance either to Pope or Emperor, sought to be a law unto themselves; and Machiavelli, in his epoch-making treatise, threw their claims and aims into the form of political philosophy. All over Europe, in the seventeenth century, the kings sought not only to make themselves independent of any supra-national control or restraint, but also to make themselves absolute masters over their subjects. As Shields quaintly put it in the *Hind Let Loose*,—"the crowned heads or horns of the beast, the tyrants, *alias* kings of Europe

<sup>1</sup> *Lauderdale Papers*, III, 76.

<sup>2</sup> P. 25.

. . . are advancing their prerogatives upon the ruins of national and ecclesiastical privileges to a pitch of absoluteness." <sup>1</sup>

This, then, was the settled principle behind the shifty policies of James VI and I, Charles I, Charles II, and James VII and II. Their aim was to realise alike in England and Scotland the servile state. Charles I had attempted too much at once and had come to grief: Charles II was wiser in his day and generation. In regard to England, with its constitutional traditions and Parliamentary forms, he walked warily. Only the bad tactics of his Whig opponents made him virtually absolute at the close of his reign. In regard to Scotland, however, he and his advisers set to work immediately to establish a form of government which approximated to an oriental despotism; that this is not an exaggerated estimate may be proved by an impartial reading of the various Acts of the Scottish Parliament during the period.

The Scottish Parliament was traditionally a weak and servile body practically at the mercy of the Lords of the Articles and the Officers of State. It is a historical commonplace that the General Assembly, rather than the Estates, expressed the feeling of the people, so far as that feeling could be focussed. Consequently, the chief opposition to the Stewart policies came from the Kirk. The Stuarts did not carry on a costly persecution out of a disinterested zeal for the Episcopalian form of Church government, nor from a belief that the spiritual interests of the people would be best served by the institution of a hierarchy. Dr Matthew M'Kail put it on record that Lauderdale valued the Episcopal clergy as little as the Presbyterian. But the Episcopal form of Church government was useful to the politicians of the Restoration, because it was essentially bureaucratic, because the royal headship was easily grafted on to it, and because the bishops—a few men who were appointed by the Crown, and were liable to be dismissed from their sees if they offended the king—were much more easily managed than annual assemblies.

As the persecution was essentially a political one, the Covenanters had of necessity a political policy called forth by the circumstances of the time. Political ideals were often expressed in theocratic phraseology; for their political philosophy was based on their ecclesiastical, *i.e.* on their doctrine of the visible Church. This doctrine deserves brief notice.

In some respects it more closely resembled the Roman doctrine than the Erastian doctrine of the Anglican and Lutheran churches. According to the Covenanting thinkers, the Church of Scotland was not merely the Church of Scotland: it was the representative in Scotland of the Church Universal. The Reformers practically took over from the Romanists the idea of catholicity and the Covenanting writers maintained this position. The true Catholic Church, they held, was world-wide.

<sup>1</sup> P. 1.



From this true Church, Rutherford maintained, the Roman hierarchy had separated, "as the rotten wall maketh the schism in the house, when the house standeth still and the rotten wall falleth." Brown of Wamphray well summarised the Covenanting doctrine of the visible Church. "The Catholic Church," he said, "hath been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them." <sup>1</sup>

That the Scottish Kirk was not viewed as a separate entity—not regarded merely as the nation on its religious side—is evident from the finding of the United Societies concerning the ministerial status of James Renwick, who was ordained by Dutch pastors. "The Church of Groningen did not make him a minister of the Church of Scotland, but they ordained him a minister of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God: a minister of the Church Universal, which is the primary relation of all ministers: a minister in any church whereof he was a member, and so consequently in Scotland." <sup>2</sup> Again, it was simply as a "minister of Jesus Christ," a minister of the Church Universal that Cargill, at the Torwood, passed the sentence of excommunication on the king and his advisers.<sup>3</sup> Shields' defence of Cargill's action was illuminating. He cited the example of Ambrose in excommunicating Theodosius and Valentinian, maintaining that the representative of the Universal Church in Scotland stood exactly on the same footing as did a bishop of the old Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup>

From the catholicity of the Church there followed of necessity its independence of the State. An organisation which transcended the State, which included within itself the inhabitants of many states, could not reconcile itself to the role of a department of state, or regard itself as the nation on its religious side. Accordingly, the Covenanters were at pains to show that there could be no secular head of the Church; the civil magistrate could in no sense be allowed to usurp the place of Christ. The Covenanting writers were, if anything, more hostile to Erastianism than to the Romanist doctrine. "Thus it fell out in England," observed M'Ward, "after the Reformation that the same, if not a more exorbitant, power taken from the Pope was transferred and settled on the Crown." <sup>5</sup> The Papacy was in effect still retained, only the person was changed from the Pope to the King. If anything, this was a change for the worse,—"the Pope being at least in show a Church man." <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by J. Macpherson, *Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology*, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> *Faithful Contendings*, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> *Sermons in Times of Persecution*, p. 498.

<sup>4</sup> *A Hind Let Loose*, p. 227.

<sup>5</sup> *The True Nonconformist*, p. 471.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.



## II

The Covenanting idea, then, was that the visible Church was world-wide, and existed independently of the State. The Kingdom of Christ, as Blackadder put it, "is another kingdom than the kingdoms of this world; for wherever Christ has a church, there is a kingdom. . . . Sometimes one of the kingdoms of the world joins itself unto the Church."<sup>1</sup> This, of course, constituted establishment, or recognition by the State.

It is evident that the political consequences of the doctrine of the visible Church—its catholicity and independence—were far-reaching.

(1) It produced a bias towards what Conservative thinkers would call disloyalty—a healthy and virile attitude towards rank and power in general, an attitude in which, it may be remarked, the Covenanters were confirmed by the dissolute lives of the king and his chief advisers. Certainly, royalty was handled by the writers of the period with a refreshing frankness. No man is born, said Sir James Stewart of Goodtrees, "with a crown on his head and a sceptre in his hand."<sup>2</sup> Kings are "men of the like passions and infirmities with the rest—yea, and subject to more temptations."<sup>3</sup> "The institution of monarchy in general," said Shields scornfully, "does not make James Stewart a king—no more than John Chamberlain."<sup>4</sup> "Kings and tyrants," he said in another connection, "are reciprocal terms."<sup>5</sup> The bias of both Stewart and Shields was manifestly towards republicanism, though both professed indifference to mere forms of government. Along with this challenging attitude towards kingship we find a solicitude for those at the other end of the scale—a tone which to-day would be called Socialistic or Radical. Thus John Welch of Irongray, in a grim sermon, declared that "the poorest man or woman that has an interest in Christ, however contemptible here, shall sit above kings, queens, princes, dukes, marquises, earls, and lords of the Earth; nay more, they shall be assessors with Jesus Christ in judgment."<sup>6</sup> Welwood, a less prominent field-preacher, handled the nobility and gentry with the utmost freedom, not only for their compliance with apostasy and their bad example generally, but for their specific sin of "oppression of the poor and racking of rents."<sup>7</sup>

(2) A second consequence flowing from the doctrine of the visible Church was the general position taken up towards the State. The cult of the State was, of course, much less developed in the seventeenth century than it latterly became. But the Covenanting writers seem to have been singularly free from the narrow nationalism which goes by the

<sup>1</sup> *Faithful Contendings*, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> *Jus Populi Vindicatum*, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> *A Hind Let Loose*, p. 238.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Appendix to *Faithful Contendings*, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Sermons in Times of Persecution*, p. 189.



name of patriotism. The historian Kirkton, for instance, took up what would have been called at a later date an unpatriotic position during the war with the Netherlands in 1666. He frankly criticised the "inglorious war," and his sympathies are quite evidently with the Dutch.<sup>1</sup> The truth is there was among the Covenanting writers no abstract conception of the State as apart from the Government of the day. But one point is clear. Loyalty was conditional on morality.

Sir James Stewart, who may be called the great legal authority of the later Covenanting period, took up the position that the State is not an end in itself, but simply a means to an end, "and this end which they intend as men must be their continued peace and tranquillity, freedom from oppression from strangers or from another, and the like; and as Christians the glory of God, the good of religion, and of their souls."<sup>2</sup> As the State itself is not sacrosanct, neither is its size nor its extent; and in a remarkable passage Stewart laid down what might be called a forecast of the modern principle of national self-determination. It is an open question, he said, "Whether people living at some considerable distance from the other, or more contiguously, should join together in one and make up one body politic; or whether they should erect more distinct and independent commonwealths, though possibly of the same extract and language. Nature sayeth not that all in one island, of one extract, or of one language, should become one politic body under one politic head."<sup>3</sup> Shields was more Conservative. "Neither are we for new erections of government," he said, "but are for keeping the society of which we are members entire";<sup>4</sup> though he did not deny the lawfulness of secession from the body politic.

As to the form of government the Covenanting writers one and all ruled out anything like hereditary absolute monarchy. This spirit was inbred in them. The Reformed Church was itself the child of revolution. The earlier Covenanters, such as Rutherford and Douglas, promulgated a very low view of kingship. Possibly, however, the Covenanting attitude to tyranny went back still further. It is a matter of common knowledge that Rutherford was greatly indebted to George Buchanan, and that *Lex Rex* is a kind of sequel to *De Jure Regni*. It is less generally realised that Buchanan was not altogether original. He certainly did not show much respect to his old teacher, John Major; for the younger man was a Protestant and the older a Catholic, and the Reformation lay between them. But, perhaps unconsciously, he imbibed Major's radical attitude to kingship, which was most probably an integral part of the old Catholic view of the visible Church, which Calvinism, in part, took over. As the late Professor Hume Brown observed: "Everything that

<sup>1</sup> *History*, pp. 214-15.

<sup>2</sup> *Jus Populi Vindicatum*, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *A Hind Let Loose*, p. 214.



Buchanan himself has said regarding the royal prerogative in Scotland, Major said before him with the quaint bluntness and directness that mark his style."<sup>1</sup> Major had explicitly stated that "as it was the people who first made kings, so the people can dethrone them when they misuse their privileges." Again, "as it is for the benefit of the whole body that an unhealthy member be removed, so it is for the welfare of the State that a tyrant be cut off."

The Covenanting thinkers were then on familiar ground when they countered the principle of the divine right of kings by the principle of a social contract. This principle was developed by Sir James Stewart, who declared that the king and the people are bound by covenant one to another. The relation of king and people was based on mutual consent, just as the relation between man and wife, master and servant, tutor and pupil. When the sovereign fails to observe his part of the bargain, he automatically forfeits his sovereignty. As early as the first decade of the Restoration regime, Stewart declared, Charles II had broken his contract.

The contract, indeed, was hardly a contract between equals. For the king had no standing whatsoever apart from the people. "Man, by nature," said Shields, "is born as free as beasts; no lion is born king of lions nor no man born king of men, nor lord of men, nor representative of men, nor ruler of men, either supreme or subordinate; because, none, by nature, can have those things that essentially constitute rulers, the calling of God, nor gifts nor qualifications for it, nor the election of the people."<sup>2</sup> This attitude is fatal not only to the divine right of kings; it is fatal to all those political theories which make the State sacrosanct. It is equally fatal to the divine right of Parliaments. All power is from the people and members of Parliament and governors are but the people's delegates. "The people's power is greater than the power of any delegated or constituted by them; the cause is more than the effect; parliament-men do represent the people, the people do not represent the parliament."<sup>3</sup> Members of Parliament are "as tutors and curators unto the people, and in effect their servants deputed to oversee their public affairs. Therefore if their power be less, the people can act without them."<sup>4</sup>

This being so, there can be no warrant for blind obedience. The human conscience is the ultimate seat of authority and the final court of appeal. It demands subjection to just and righteous rulers, but not to "tyrannical powers." Conscience in the nature of things must deny tyranny, which is not ordained by God. Only a government founded on what Shields expressively called a "bottom of conscience" will unite the "governed to the governors" by inclination as well as by duty.

<sup>1</sup> *George Buchanan*, p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> *A Hind Let Loose*, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.



## III

So much for the theoretical formulation of the Covenanting position. During the twenty-eight years of persecution, theoretical statements were frequently brought to the test.

There were among the non-indulged Covenanters two distinct strains of thought. There was the Moderate group, including such men as Welch, Blackadder, Fraser of Brea; there was the Cameronian party, which actually drew its inspiration from the exiles, Brown and M'Ward, and was afterwards led by Cargill, Cameron, and Renwick. The Moderates were themselves divided into two sections—the more militant party led by Welch and the pacifist non-resisters, such as Blackadder and Fraser.

At first the Moderates were in the majority. While holding in reserve such theories as the derivation of kingly power and the right of the people to dethrone the king, they walked warily and demanded only modest reforms. They were divided in their attitude to resistance. Blackadder, who held what to-day would be called a pacifist position, objected to the practice of carrying arms to conventicles. "Trust rather in Jehovah and the shield of Omnipotence" was his advice on one occasion.<sup>1</sup> And while he did not seek to dissuade those whose consciences were clear, he himself refused to take part in either of the risings. Fraser went further; he preached against armed rebellion. On the other hand, Welch was "out" at Pentland and again at Bothwell, and Semple, another prominent field-preacher, took part in the first-named rising. Welch, however, was present in the camp at Bothwell, as a moderating influence, and in the Hamilton Declaration, for which he was largely responsible, the appeal to arms was spoken of as a last remedy. The Moderates were therefore averse from rebellion. My own judgment is that they were right. The two risings were tactical errors, and the Bothwell rising was a blunder of the first magnitude. The policy of passive resistance had all but paralysed the Government in the seventies; the policy of active resistance not only divided the Covenanters but gave the Government the excuse for intensifying the persecution with redoubled fury. Burnet records that Lauderdale said to him, "Would to God they would rebel," so "that he might bring over an army of Irish papists to cut all their throats":<sup>2</sup> and rebel they did.

After the Bothwell rising, the Moderate party was virtually eliminated. Its last representative, Blackadder, was sent to the Bass in 1681. Henceforth the resistance was led by the Cameronians, the left-wing party. Step by step they developed and applied the policy implicit in the Covenanting theory of the State. The Rutherglen Declaration of 1679 breathed

<sup>1</sup> Blackadder's *Memoirs*, 1st edit., p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> *History*, p. 226.

a much more defiant spirit than the Hamilton Declaration issued by the Moderate party. After Bothwell Brig, the Cameronian remnant issued several declarations which marked successive stages in the working out of their policy. Of these the most important was the Queensferry Paper, generally conceded to be in the main the work of Cargill. While others had demonstrated that the king had broken the social contract, that he was ethically unfitted to receive the obedience of his subjects and that kings might be deposed, Cargill and his coadjutors drew the obvious inference and definitely withdrew allegiance. The House of Stewart was declared to be untrustworthy, and accordingly they proceeded to reject the king and to establish a community of their own—a kind of state within the State. The paper declared for republicanism, with a legal system modelled on that of ancient Israel, and closed with a warning that interference with the rights and liberties of those who signed it would be regarded as a declaration of war. In the famous Sanquhar Declaration, Cameron declared war on Charles II, while at Torwood, Cargill cut the king and his advisers off from the fellowship of the visible Church. By 1684 the policy of reprisals implicit in the Queensferry Paper had been definitely adopted in the Apologetical Declaration, and the United Societies had endorsed the first-named document practically in its entirety. They had thrown off all allegiance to the king, and regarded themselves as in a state of war against him ; their members were forbidden to pay taxes or to contribute to the support of the Erastian clergy or to recognise the jurisdiction of the courts of law. Literally the Cameronians had set up a state within the State. In a sense the Revolution may be said to have broken out in 1680.

The Cameronian attitude to the question of military service is not without interest. They did not, of course, question the legitimacy of war ; the lawfulness of defensive war, by which they meant rebellion, was all along maintained by them. They were indeed enthusiastic for the use of force, differing sharply from the moderate Covenanters. They objected *in toto*, however, to militarism, because based on the principle of blind obedience. During the negotiations concerning the enlistment of the Society people in the regiment raised under the command of Lord Angus, in support of the Revolution, a “ humble petition ” was drafted by those who desired to serve in the regiment. Among the demands put forward was one “ that our officers be always of our own choice or approbation : and that none be obtruded upon us without our consent ; . . . that as soon as peace is settled and fears of rebellion or invasion cease, such as have a mind to go off to have liberty and their vacancies supplied with the approbation of the rest.”<sup>1</sup> It should, of course, be remembered that it was as a community at war with the other factions of the State that the

<sup>1</sup> *Faithful Contendings*, p. 399.



Cameronians believed themselves to be in a position to state their terms to the new Government before they accorded it military support.

#### IV

That the Covenanting political ideals were essentially Liberal, using that word in its widest sense, has, of course, been denied by numerous historians—denied, I think, on inadequate grounds. The denial is usually made on the grounds of their intolerance. That the Covenanters were intolerant there can be no doubt; that intolerance was inherent in their political system is, in my opinion, untrue. The doctrine of the Headship of Christ, which was their master-concept, spells freedom of conscience when pressed to its logical conclusion. The Covenanters were afraid of the logical conclusion—afraid that they would be carried along the path of the Sectaries, or the Quakers, or the Socinians. Accordingly, they limited the application of their principle by the doctrines of the inerrancy of Scripture and the necessity of orthodoxy. But important as was the influence of their beliefs on these points, more important still was the effect of their doctrine of the visible Church. In common with all Calvinists, they believed that there was but one true Church: the idea of separate churches, existing side by side in the same country, was below their intellectual horizon. Obviously, the idea of toleration, as we of to-day understand it, was therefore unthinkable. Throughout the whole of the period the Covenanting position, as formulated in the National Covenant, and more particularly in the Solemn League and Covenant, was that the visible Church must be purged of error—"popery, prelacy, superstition, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness." Only a few Protestants of the extreme left grasped the idea of toleration in the seventeenth century. Only experience of the futility of persecution and counter-persecution drove Protestants as a whole to its acceptance.

Taken all in all, we are entitled to claim that the political ideals of the Covenanters were enlightened and democratic, and that to ignore their part in the shaping of progressive political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is to leave out of account one of the formative forces in British history, and is, to use the phrase which John Morley used in another connection, "to read history with one eye shut."