

The Ideology of Oliver Cromwell

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Source: *Church History*, Sep., 1966, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Sep., 1966), pp. 259-272

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Society of Church History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3162307>

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## THE IDEOLOGY OF OLIVER CROMWELL

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The problem of Oliver Cromwell's religious beliefs and the sincerity of those beliefs is one that has bedevilled historians from the seventeenth century to the present. Ultimately it is not one that will yield a concrete solution, for it is far too dependent on subjective considerations. Nevertheless, the impossibility of its definite resolution does not permit historians the expediency of dispensing with an enquiry into Cromwell's religion; for it is certainly the most striking characteristic of the man as he is revealed in his writings and speeches.

At the outbreak of the English Civil War in 1642, Oliver Cromwell was identified with the emerging party of Independents. At that time religious Independency was not necessarily synonymous with political Independency. One cause for this was the fact that the self-conscious religious movement was of later origin than the political schism from the Presbyterian parliamentary party. Since the concern of this paper is with Oliver Cromwell's religious position, we need only undertake a definition of religious Independency. The religious Independents were that group which broke from the Presbyterians primarily over the issue of a synodically organized state church, rejecting synods as well as bishops. The idea of church government which the Independents formulated prescribed that each individual congregation should be an independent gathered fellowship of the saints.

As an Independent, Cromwell had a greater amount of freedom to chart his own religious course than did most of his contemporaries. His ultimate religious authority was his own interpretation of the action of the Holy Spirit on him, as it spoke both directly to his conscience, and mediately through the Holy Scriptures.

As one might suppose, Cromwell's Independency is most apparent when it is in conflict with Presbyterianism. Such a conflict occurred in 1650 when Oliver Cromwell led an invading army against his former Presbyterian allies, the Scots under David Leslie. After defeating Leslie at Dunbar in September, 1650, Cromwell moved on to Edinburgh where he was unable to take the castle. Stalled, Cromwell tried to win over the governor of the castle, Sir Walter Dundas, by exposing the errors of the Scots Presbyterian ministers.

But we have not so learned Christ. We look at ministers as helpers of, and not lords over the faith of God's people.

.....you say that you have just cause to regret that men of civil employments should usurp the calling and employment of the ministry,

to the scandal of the Reformed Kirks. Are you troubled that Christ is preached? . . . . . if these things be scandalous to the Kirk, and against the Covenant, because done by men of civil callings, we rejoice in them, notwithstanding what you say.<sup>1</sup>

Cromwell shows himself to be a true Independent in this letter. He and his fellow Independents differed radically from the Presbyterians about the nature of the ministry and the amount of formal preparation necessary in order to realize one's call to proclaim the word of God. Like Milton, Cromwell believed that man's talents should be put at the Lord's disposal, and further, that they should be employed immediately the spirit moves their use. When called, in all likelihood one will feel inadequate, but he should nevertheless be moved by the call, and meet it where he stands.

I am a poor weak creature, and not worthy of the name of a worm; yet accepted to serve the Lord and His people. Indeed, my dear friend, between you and me, you know not me, my weakness, my inordinate passions, my sinfulness and every way unfitness to my work. Yet, yet the Lord, who will have mercy on whom He will, does as you see.<sup>2</sup>

Another fundamental idea of the Independents was that the Saints should come together in a gathered fellowship. This was illustrated in the Putney Debates of October and November 1647 in which Cromwell, as Lieutenant General of the Horse, took a prominent part. During these meetings of the Council of the Army, called to consider the attitude of the Independent Army toward a Presbyterian Parliament and an Episcopalian King, it was decided that the morning should be spent in seeking the guidance of the Lord, and the afternoon in discussion. The theory, almost an operating principle of the Independents, was that the spirit of the Lord would guide the gathered fellowship to the truth. Cromwell's speech on November first is one of the best explanations that we have of the way that God was thought to function through the gathered fellowship.

Truly we have heard many speaking to us: and I cannot but think that in many of those things God hath spoke to us. I cannot but think that in most that have spoke there hath been something of God laid forth to us, and yet there have been several contradictions in what hath been spoken. But certainly God is not the author of contradictions. The contradictions are not so much in the end as the way.<sup>3</sup>

As a derivative of his Independency, Oliver Cromwell was an advocate of toleration. In his advocacy he comes off rather better than many Independents, who, while they were a persecuted minority, quite naturally favored toleration; but who, when they gained control of the government and church in 1653, tried to suppress their religious opponents. Toleration was one of the most consistent of Cromwell's religious policies. It was based on the principle of recognition and acceptance of the rights of those religious groups which did not foster

1. W. C. Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), II, 337-339.

2. *Ibid.*, II, 483. From a letter to John Cotton in Boston, October 2, 1651.

3. A.S.P. Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1938), p. 104.

political disorder. This meant that the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, and sometimes the Presbyterians were excluded from official toleration. Cromwell stated his position in a letter to the Scots Presbyterian Edward Dundas on September 12, 1650.

Your pretended fear lest error should step in, is like the man that would keep all the wine out the country lest men should be drunk. It will be found an unjust and unwise jealousy, to deny a man the liberty he hath by nature upon a supposition he may abuse it. When he doth abuse it, judge. If a man speak foolishly, ye suffer him gladly because ye are wise; if erroneously, the truth more appears by your conviction. Stop such a man's mouth with sound words, that cannot be gainsayed; if he speak blasphemously, or to the disturbance of the public peace, let the civil magistrate punish him; if truly, rejoice in the truth.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1650 Cromwell and the Council of the Army issued a declaration to "All that are Saints, the Partakers of the Faith of God's Elect, in Scotland," in order to prepare them for the invasion which they were about to suffer. In this document the rationale for Cromwell's tolerance is to be found:

We say, faith working by love is the true character of a Christian; and, God is our witness, in whomsoever we see any thing of Christ to be, there we reckon our duty to love, waiting for a more plentiful effusion of the spirit of God to make all those Christians, who, by the malice of the world, are diversified.<sup>5</sup>

This statement reveals that Cromwell and the army officers were convinced that they had a monopoly on religious truth. They were so certain of it, that they were willing to wait for God to guide others to their and His way. One is, therefore, tolerant, removing fetters of man's making so that the fetters of God may have their full binding effect.

When Cromwell's actions are balanced against his words, too often there is a deficit. Toleration, however, is an exception to this rule. Cromwell was one of the most tolerant men of his day, and this is doubly remarkable in light of the fact that he had more power than any other man in England between 1650 and his death in September, 1658. Under him the Jews, who were being driven from Spain and Portugal by the Inquisition, were accepted in England, Cromwell giving his verbal assurance that the recusancy laws would not be enforced against them. Although Roman Catholics were denied toleration by the Instrument of Government, the Venetian Ambassador, Sagredo, reported in October, 1655, that the government's policy was: "to deprive the Catholics of their possessions, but to let them hear as many Masses as they would."<sup>6</sup> At the other end of the religious spectrum we find that Cromwell was far more tolerant of

4. Abbott, II, 337-339.

5. *Ibid.*, II, 283.

6. S.R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate* (3 vols.; London: Longman, Green, 1894-1901), III, 235. A letter from Sagredo to the Doge, October 19/29, 1655.

the Quakers than were his correlative religionists. One of the reasons that the Independents reacted so violently against the Quakers was that this group seemed to caricature their own words and actions. It enraged them to hear a "godly" and "honest" Independent minister called "a priest," as George Fox and his followers were wont to do. Yet, Cromwell, according to Fox's *Journal*, listened patiently to Fox's tirades against the Independents, and ended by securing his release from prison—although Fox was more inclined to give the credit to the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

There can be little doubt that Quakers could easily have been categorized as disturbers of the peace; and Cromwell did have one Quaker arrested after he had interrupted a sermon at Whitehall. But the case of James Nayler shows the extent to which Cromwell would go to avoid interfering with what he conceived to be God's plan. As reported in the *Parliamentary Diary of Thomas Burton*,<sup>8</sup> Nayler was tried by the second Protectorate Parliament in December, 1656, and January, 1657, for "horrid blasphemy." This blasphemy consisted of riding on a donkey through the streets of Bristol, proclaiming himself the Christ, and followed by women of the town crying "Hosanna." Even Fox dissociated himself from his disciple, openly condemning Nayler. Nayler was lucky to escape with his life, but Parliament in its "mercy" condemned him merely to whipping, pillorying, ear cropping, and imprisonment. Cromwell, however, acting on an appeal from some of Nayler's followers, defied Parliament; at first shortening the prison term, and finally issuing a pardon (after Nayler had recanted). To be sure there were political reasons for the Protector's defiance of Parliament, but he also acted from his deep commitment to toleration.

Toleration, then, is another hallmark of Cromwell's puritanism. A third characteristic was his biblicism. This point need not be labored, as it was indigenous to seventeenth-century England. Suffice it to say that Cromwell was a reader of the Bible, and it showed in his speech which was replete with biblical allusions, especially from the Old Testament.

There is enough evidence in Cromwell's utterances for us to brand his theological position—although he is not as easy to pigeon-hole as are the Puritan preachers and authors of diaries. Cromwell was closer to the mystics than he was to any other group of Puritans. By a mystic I mean one who feels that some sort of union between the believer and one of the persons of the Trinity is possible. In Cromwell's case, the union was to be with the second person, Christ, who is the head of the body of Christians. Cromwell revealed

7. George Fox, *The Autobiography of George Fox*, ed. Rufus Jones (Phila.: Fervis and Leach, 1904), I, 267.

8. Thomas Burton, *The Diary of Thomas Burton, esq., member in the Parliaments of Oliver Cromwell from 1656-59*, ed. John Towill Rutt (4 vols.; London: H. Colburn, 1828).

more of his inner feelings in letters to his son, Richard, than he did to any other correspondent; and a letter written to him on April 2, 1650, contains perhaps the clearest expression of Oliver's mysticism:

You cannot find nor behold the face of God but in Christ; therefore labour to know God in Christ, which the Scripture makes to be the sum of all, even life eternal. Because the true knowledge is not literal or speculative, but inward, transforming the mind to it. *It's uniting to, and participating of, the Divine Nature.*<sup>9</sup>

If we can depend on the testimony of a hostile witness, Clement Walker, Cromwell developed the reputation of pretending to divine inspiration through direct communion with the Holy Spirit.

Sunday after Easter-day six preachers militant at Whitehall tried the patience of their hearers; one calling up another successively; at last the Spirit of the Lord called up Oliver Cromwell, who standing a good while with lifted up eyes, as it were in a trance, and his neck a little inclining to one side, as if he had expected Mahomet's dove to descend and murmur in his ear; and sending forth abundantly the groans of the Spirit, spent an hour in prayer, and an hour and a half in a Sermon. . . . It is now reported of him, that he pretendeth to inspirations; and that when any great or weighty matter is propounded, he usually retireth for a quarter or half an hour and then returneth and delivereth out the Oracles of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

There can be no doubt that Cromwell's theological position led him to believe that he had a very close liaison with the Divinity. He thought of himself as a special instrument of God's will, and the almost uniform success of his acts seemed to reinforce this belief.

There are at least two important questions which come to mind as one superimposes Cromwell the Puritan on Cromwell the General: Did his puritanism have anything to do with his success as a military commander? Did he feel a tension between his religious beliefs and the necessity which he was under to kill his fellow men?

On the face of it, it appears strange that an amateur should have become the outstanding general of the English Revolution. There were, after all, a number of Englishmen who had had considerable experience fighting in the Thirty Years' War. Some historians have attempted to explain Cromwell's success by the hypothesis that he spent the three "lost years" after coming down from Cambridge, fighting with the English troops sent to aid the Elector Palatinate. One does not, however, need to turn to such an elaborate or tenuous theory in order to explain Cromwell's genius as a general. From all appearances, the spark of his genius was his concern for discipline, and the ability to communicate to his troops both his zeal for discipline and dedication to his cause. Both of these facts, I contend, are closely linked to his beliefs and character as a Puritan.

In cavalry tactics, Cromwell followed the lead of Gustavus Adolphus. Instead of riding up to the enemy, stopping, and discharg-

9. Abbott, II, 236 (Italics mine.)

10. Clement Walker, *The History of Independency* (3 vols.; London: 1647-51), II, 153-154.



ing its firearms, Cromwell's cavalry rode up to and through the enemy. Theirs was a "hell bent for leather" cavalry charge. At this point the unique element of discipline was decisive. Instead of pursuing the enemy in its flight from battle, Cromwell's men would regroup and move to another part of the field. This was the tactic that saved the day at Marston Moor in July, 1644, where Cromwell's flanking attack on the left wing, after he had smashed the Royalist right wing, turned defeat into victory, even though the Parliamentary commander, Fairfax, had been driven from the field. Discipline was what made Cromwell a greater cavalry commander than Prince Rupert, who was a master in his own right of the cavalry charge *à la* Adolphus. Clarendon noted this difference in his *History* when speaking of Rupert's men at the battle of Naseby.

They having, as they thought, acted their parts, could never be brought to rally themselves again in order, or to charge the enemy. And that difference was observed shortly from the beginning of the war, in the discipline of the King's troops and of those which marched under the command of Cromwell (for it was only under him, and had never been notorious under Essex or Waller), that though the King's troops prevailed in the charge, and routed those they charged, they never rallied themselves again in order, nor could be brought to make a second charge again the same day: . . . whereas Cromwell's troops, if they prevailed, or though they were beaten and presently routed, rallied again and stood in good order till they received new orders.<sup>11</sup>

Discipline was a characteristic of Cromwell as it was of other Puritans, and this personal as well as religious concern was carried over into his ideas about military conduct. These ideas would not, however, have had such striking effect had not Cromwell carefully picked his troops. His concern was for "Godly men and brave," no matter what their station in life. A manifestation, I believe, not only of his shrewdness but of his Independency. Here are two scraps of testimony to Cromwell's methods of troop selection and training.

Col. Cromwell raysing of his regiment makes choyce of his officers not such as were souldiers or men of estate, but such as were common men, pore and of mean parentage, onely he would given them the title of godly, pretious men. I have heard him oftentimes say that it must not be souldiers nor Scots that must doe this worke, but it must be the godly to this purpose.<sup>12</sup>

I had rather have a plain russet-coated captain that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a gentleman, and is nothing else. I honour a gentleman that is so indeed.<sup>13</sup>

The troops of the Eastern Association who served under Cromwell before 1645, and of the New Model Army after that date were in a very real sense a gathered fellowship. They marched into battle singing hymns and psalms, and lifting up their voices to the Lord after

11. Clarendon, Edward Earl of, *History of the Rebellion*, ed. Macray (6 vols.; Oxford: The University Press, 1888), Book IX, 41.

12. Abbott, I, 231. This statement was made by the Earl of Manchester.

13. *Ibid.*, I, 256.

the usual victory; as at Dunbar in September, 1650, where they sang Psalm 117, "O give praise unto the Lord." Richard Baxter gives us concrete evidence that Cromwell's troop organized itself into a gathered church: "When he lay at Cambridge long before with that famous Troop which he began his Army with, his officers purposed to make their Troop a gathered Church, and they all subscribed an Invitation to me to be their Pastor, and sent it me to Coventry: I sent them a Denial."<sup>14</sup> The religious conviction of Cromwell's men, fighting for God's cause, gave them an *esprit de corps* which is almost unparalleled in the history of modern warfare. It was Cromwell's genius that he organized and disciplined that spirit.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the soldiers of Oliver Cromwell were fighting a holy war in the name of God's people. For this reason, the idea of bloodshed did not particularly bother them or their commander. The biblical precedent for a holy war was the conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua; the Israelites were ordered by Yahweh to slaughter the Canaanites so that subsequently they would not be polluted by them. This Old Testament parallel applied fairly well to Cromwell's attitude, especially during the Irish Campaign of 1649. Most Englishmen viewed the Irish in about the same light that the devout Israelites saw the Canaanites. Cromwell was no exception, as his later settlement of Ireland shows and as this extract from the General Council of the Army at Whitehall on March 23, 1649, reveals.

I had rather be overrun with a Cavalierish interest than a Scotch interest; and I had rather be overrun with a Scotch interest, than an Irish interest; and I think of all this is most dangerous. If they shall be able to carry on their work, they will make this the most miserable people in the earth, for all the world knows their barbarism—not of any religion, almost any of them, but in a manner as bad as Papists—and you see how considerable they are therein at this time.<sup>15</sup>

The *Perfect Diurnal* of August 23, 1649, quotes Cromwell's speech upon his arrival in Dublin on August 15. In this speech he called the Irish "Barbarous and bloodthirsty." This attitude helps to explain the matter-of-fact way in which Cromwell slaughtered the priests and garrison at Drogheda in September, 1649. This slaughter has been one of the stumbling blocks to Cromwell's apologists; but it is evident from the way that he reported the action to John Bradshaw, that Cromwell was unaware that it needed any apology.

Being thus entered, we refused them quarter; having, the day before summoned the town. I believe we put to the sword the whole number of defendants. I do not think thirty of the whole number escaped with their lives. Those that did, are in safe custody for Barbadoes. . . .

This hath been a marvelous great mercy.<sup>16</sup>

14. *Ibid.*, I, 702.

15. *Ibid.*, II, 38.

16. *Ibid.*, II, 124. Letter to John Bradshaw, September 16, 1649.



To speaker Lenthall, Cromwell wrote: "I am convinced that this is a righteous judgment of God upon those barbarous wretches who have imbued their hands in so much innocent blood."<sup>17</sup> Viewed in the light of the concept of a holy war, I think that Cromwell's attitude after the massacre of Drogheda at least is explicable. The God of the conquest of Canaan was a ruthless God demanding much blood in order to assure the purity of His people. So, too, the God of the conquest of Ireland upheld the arm of his people against a barbarous and heathenish race, which had provoked His wrath by the slaughter of His people in the Revolt of 1641.

The concept of the English and more explicitly the Puritans as God's people requires some analysis in conjunction with this discussion of the "holy war." A letter written in September, 1645, to General Leven shows Cromwell, Fairfax, Hammond, and Ireton, thanking the Scotsman for his assistance "against the power that was risen up against the Lord himself, and *his anointed ones*."<sup>18</sup> In a number of instances Cromwell refers to "His people," meaning usually the revolutionary parties, but sometimes more specifically the Independents. At other times he talks about building the "Sion of the Holy one of Israel." Cromwell was not a Fifth Monarchist, for his eschatology was neither as detailed nor as imminent as theirs. He did, however, believe that the Saints of England had been elected to carry out God's purpose on earth. And it is not too much to assume that Cromwell looked upon England as the new land of promise.

This brings us to a discussion of Cromwell's doctrine of providence. We have already seen that for him the objects of God's special providence were His Saints who sought to establish a new Zion in England. Believing as he did that the Holy Spirit used human beings as the instruments of God's will, Cromwell held a very strong conviction that outward dispensations are a sign of inward grace, i.e. the selection as a special instrument of God's will. Cromwell's doctrine of providence certainly was consistent with his theological position as we have outlined it. It was also consistent with the events of his public life; for, believing as he did that God worked His will through men, Cromwell could not doubt that he was a particular instrument of this will in the light of the almost unparalleled success he enjoyed as a military commander. One can see Cromwell's view that he and the army were the arms of God's righteousness solidify with each successive victory, especially from that of Marston Moor in July, 1644.

Truly England and the Church of God hath had a great favour from the Lord, in this great victory given unto us, such as the like never was since this war began. It had all the evidences of an absolute vic-

17. Thomas Carlyle, *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (3 vols.; 3rd edition; London: Methuen Co., 1904), I, 510.

18. Abbott, I, 371. (*Italics mine.*)

tory obtained by the Lord's blessing upon the godly party principally. . . . . God made them as stubble to our swords, we charged their regiments of foot with our horse, routed all we charged. . . . Give glory, all the glory to God.<sup>19</sup>

After the next great victory, Naseby, in June of 1645, Cromwell wrote to Lenthall: "Sir, this is none other but the hand of God; and to Him alone belongs the glory, wherein none are to share with Him."<sup>20</sup> After taking Bristol in September, 1645, Cromwell wrote to Lenthall that a man would have to be an atheist not to see the hand of God in the work. He added, "Sir, they that have been employed in this service know that faith and prayer obtained this city for you."<sup>21</sup> Of Preston in August, 1648, Cromwell said: "We are sure the good will of Him who dwelt in the bush has shined upon us."<sup>22</sup> The interesting thing about the battle of Dunbar in September, 1650, is that David Leslie, Cromwell's defeated opponent, agreed with the Lord General that the hand of God was against the Scots. "It was the visible hand of God, and our own laciness, and not of man, that defeat them."<sup>23</sup> That God had intervened decisively seemed patent to both sides, perhaps because of the contrast between the hopelessness of the English position before the battle, and the resounding defeat of the Scots which ensued. Last in this order of battlefield testimonials, there is Cromwell's well-known reference to the victory at Worcester (September, 1651): "The dimensions of this mercy are above my thoughts. It is, for aught I know, a crowning mercy."<sup>24</sup>

On the basis of "mercy" upon "mercy" Cromwell became convinced that the hand of God was on the "Godly party," or in our language, the Independents. This conviction became the heart of the gospel which he preached to all who would listen and read. Cromwell preached his gospel of providences most frequently to those who previously had been his allies, but since had apostatized from the Godly cause; namely those who served the King during the second Civil War, having fought for the Parliament in the first.

Robert Hammond, the king's jailor on the Isle of Wight during the second Civil War, was one of the those who if not actually an apostate from the "Godly cause" was in danger of falling away. Cromwell wrote to Hammond in November of 1648 because he was afraid that he would obey Parliament's and not the Army's orders regarding the disposition of the King's person. Cromwell's argument was that Hammond should look at providences to see which way the finger of God was pointing. Obviously providences pointed to Cromwell and the Army, and the inference was that Hammond

19. *Ibid.*, I, 287. Letter to Valentine Walton, July 5, 1644.

20. *Ibid.*, I, 287. Letter to William Lenthall, June 14, 1645.

21. *Ibid.*, I, 377. Letter to William Lenthall, September 14, 1645.

22. *Ibid.*, I, 696. Letter to Robert Hammond, November 25, 1648.

23. *Ibid.*, II, 820.

24. *Ibid.*, III, 463. Letter to William Lenthall, September 7, 1651.

should listen to the voice of God as He spoke through His servant Oliver Cromwell.

My dear friend, let us look into providences; surely they mean somewhat. They hang together; have been so constant, so clear and unclouded. . . What think of you of Providence disposing the hearts of so many of God's people this way especially in this poor Army, wherein the great God has vouchsafed to appear. I know not one officer among us but is on the increasing hand. . . . Dear Robin beware of men, look up to the Lord. Let Him be free to speak and command in thy heart. Take heed of the things I fear thou hast reasoned thyself into, and thou shalt be able through Him, without consulting flesh and blood, to do valiantly for Him and for His people.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most striking uses to which Cromwell put his doctrine of providence was the way in which he used it against fellow Puritans, the Scots, to show them that God had thrown His weight behind the Independent rather than the Presbyterian cause.

We could wish blindness hath not been upon your eyes to all those marvelous dispensations which God hath wrought lately in England. But did not you solemnly appeal and pray? did not we do so too? And ought not you and we to think, with fear and trembling, of the hand of the Great God in this mighty and strange appearance of His; but can slightly call it an event! Were not both yours and our expectations renewed from time to time, whilst we waited on God, to see which way He would manifest Himself upon our appeals? And shall we, after all these our prayers, fastings, tears, expectations and solemn appeals, call these bare events? The Lord pity you.<sup>26</sup>

It is obvious that Cromwell's almost blind belief in providence was very useful to him. His frequent protestations about the hand of God guiding his actions are the source of most of the charges of hypocrisy which are levelled at him. Cromwell was aware of these charges, and made his own defense in a speech given at the dissolution of his first Protectorate Parliament on January 22, 1655.

But if any man shall object 'It is an easy thing to talk of necessity: would not the Lord Protector make himself great and his family great? Doth not he make these necessities?' This were something hard indeed. But I have not yet known what it is to make necessities whatsoever the judgments or thoughts of men are. And I say this, not only to this assembly, but to the world, that man liveth not, that can come to me and charge me with having in these great Revolutions, made necessities . . . let them take heed and be twice advised how they call His Revolutions, the things of God, and His working of things from one period to another—how I say, they call them necessities of men's creation! For by so doing they do vilify and lessen the works of God and rob Him of His glory.<sup>27</sup>

Cromwell never admitted to the charge of hypocrisy. In his defence, it can be shown that he was consistent in his doctrine of providence, so that when events went against him, he interpreted this as a sign of God's displeasure.

25. *Ibid.*, II, 696.

26. *Ibid.*, II, 337. Letter to the governor of Edinburgh Castle, September 12, 1650.

27. Carlyle, III, 123.

A striking illustration of Cromwell's consistency appears in the failure of his West Indian expedition under Penn and Venables in 1655. The fleet set sail in the Spring of 1655 with instructions to attack and take Hispaniola. The attack failed, but Jamaica was conquered as a consolation. Jamaica had not been in the Protector's plans, since it was not strategically located as a base for attacks on Spanish treasure ships sailing from the Main. Therefore, the expedition was, in the eyes of most contemporaries, one of the most colossal failures of the Interregnum. Cromwell was so disappointed that he had Venables locked up for disobedience to orders. Cromwell's interpretation of these events is, from the point of view of our concern, the most interesting feature of this episode. In a speech on September 17, 1656, made to open the second Protectorate Parliament, he claimed the loss as a sign of God's disapproval of the attack.<sup>28</sup> In so doing, he showed himself willing to draw the logical conclusion from his doctrine of providence in defeat as well as in victory.

Establishing the fact that Cromwell saw God's providence in defeat as in victory does not fully answer the question of his sincerity. Since Cromwell was a dictator, and since his ideology was Puritanism, it is quite important to come to some conclusion about his religious sincerity. This has been the weak spot in most biographies and other appraisals of the Protector. It has been a weak spot partially because of the difficulty of evaluating the character of a man who was either violently hated or uncritically admired by those who knew him; but also because too often the effort has not been made to correlate what Cromwell said with what he did. This is possible in all too few instances. Nevertheless, where it can be done it is very revealing.

The first point at which we can check Cromwell's professions against the facts is the April 20, 1653, forcible dissolution of the Rump; the last link with the pre-civil war government. The Army had chafed under the policy of the Rump for some time, and Cromwell negotiated with its members to put a term to their sitting. On the eve of the dissolution, Cromwell had worked out a compromise with Mathew Hale whereby the Rump would take steps to call an election. However, on April 20, Cromwell learned that he was being betrayed. The Parliament was voting to prolong its life. He therefore prepared files of musketeers and went up to the Commons ready to dissolve them. There was, and is, scarcely any doubt in anyone's mind that Cromwell had long debated what he should do with the Rump, and that the events of April 20 had convinced him that he must use force to be rid of it. However, James Heath, in

28. Carlyle, II, 508-557.

his *Flagellum* quotes Cromwell as saying: "When I went there, I did not think to have done this. But perceiving the spirit of God so strong upon me, I would not consult flesh and blood."<sup>29</sup> One immediately asks, if Cromwell did not intend to dismiss the Parliament, why did he have his musketeers in readiness, and why was Major General Harrison's cooperation in removing the speaker from his seat so well timed? It very much looks as if Cromwell was trying to place responsibility on the Holy Spirit, that actually belonged on his own shoulders. The dismissal of the Rump is at best a cloudy incident, and too much should not be made of it. There is, however, another incident which shows more clearly that Cromwell was capable of deliberately using Religion to screen his political motives.

There is a large number of documents which deal with the negotiations between England and France on one hand, and England and Spain on the other, during the period from March, 1654, until the Autumn of 1655. Both of these countries were willing to pay a high price for an alliance with the powerful Protectorate. It is clear from the correspondence between the French Ambassador, Bordeaux, and Cardinal Mazarin, and between the Spanish Ambassador, Cardenas, and the government of Philipp IV,<sup>30</sup> that the Protector was determined to ally with one or the other of these countries; depending upon which alliance would be more advantageous. The advantages which he hoped to gain appear both in the correspondence of the ambassadors, Bordeaux and Cardenas, and in an abstract of two meetings of the Protector's Council.<sup>31</sup> The considerations which finally led to a treaty with France and an attack on Spain in the Summer of 1655 were: the monetary profit of a war on Spanish treasure ships, the strategic position of the West Indies together with the weakness of their defenses, the possibility of warring with Spain in the New World while continuing to trade with her in the Old, and the extreme "popishness" of Spain's Catholicism.

From the outset, it appeared more likely that the Protectorate would employ its 160 ships "swimming after the Dutch War" against Spain rather than France. But there were serious negotiations with Cardenas, in hopes that Spain would pay a high price for England's friendship. After all, alliance against France would have been an alliance against the oppressor of the Huguenots and the protector of Charles II and the Royalists.

The most striking impression yielded by the documents is the almost detached calculation that lay behind the decision to attack

29. Abbott, II, 644.

30. Contained in the Appendices of Francois Guizot's *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate* (trans. A. R. Scoble, 1851).

31. Sir William Clark, *The Clark Papers* (4 vols.; London: Printed for the Camden Society, 1891-1901) III, 307-309.



the Spanish. A balance sheet of advantages and disadvantages of such an attack was actually compiled by the Protector's Council.<sup>32</sup> The two ambassadors were held off as long as possible in hopes of better offers from their masters. Finally, a war with Spain was launched with a surprise attack in the West Indies, after the scales had been tipped heavily in its favor.

At this point, one may turn to the Protector's speech opening the Parliament of 1656, which had been called, in part, to supply funds for the war against Spain. He spoke as if there never had been a possibility of a Spanish alliance, and as if England had been called by God to rid the world of that idolatrous nation.

The Spaniard is your enemy; and is your enemy (as I told you) naturally, and in diverse respects. You could not, you could not have an honest nor honourable peace with him: it was sought by the Long Parliament; it was not attained. It could not be attained with honour and honesty. . . . He is naturally throughout an enemy; and enmity is put into him by God. "I will put an enmity between thy seed and his seed." And the Spaniard is not only our enemy accidentally, but he is providentially so; God having in His wisdom disposed it so to be, when we made a breach with that nation long ago.<sup>33</sup>

If God had intended a war with Spain, and if, "you could not have an honest nor honourable peace with him:" why did Cromwell negotiate for a year and a half with "the Spaniard"? The answer is that in this case Cromwell used his doctrine of providence to rationalize his opportunism. He had contemplated an alliance with Spain. However, when practical considerations determined that there would be no such alliance, he used the Religious aversion between the English and Spanish to justify the war, and to stir up popular enthusiasm for it. This is one of the few instances where the documents allow us to go behind the scenes to check Cromwell's professions—and they reveal insincerity.

Cromwell was capable of using his Puritan beliefs as a smoke-screen for quite mundane political decisions. I do not think, however, that we can conclude from this that Oliver Cromwell was at bottom a hypocrite, as most of his enemies believed. There can be no question of the fundamental sincerity of his Independency. Nor is there any doubt that Cromwell's religious beliefs were determinative in shaping his military and political career. There was, however, a shift in the quality of Cromwell's religion as he came more and more to dominate events in the 1650's. The concept of "ideology" is useful in understanding this shift.

In Cromwell's case, one may apply the word "ideology" in something very like the Marxist use of the word. To the extent that "ideology" implies conscious rationalization, it does not apply to

32. *Ibid.*

33. Carlyle, II, 511.



Oliver Cromwell. Calculated hypocrisy was seldom part of his character. However, he did become a dictator, and he rose to that position on the wings of his trust that God had chosen him as a special instrument of His will. Believing as he did that human success and failure is directly attributable to the intervention of God, it is little wonder that he came to look upon himself as God's special agent for the reformation and reconstruction of England. Once this belief had become a conviction it functioned as an "ideology." As a result of his spectacular success Cromwell's judgment was fatally weakened. He became incapable of distinguishing between that which was clearly his own will and that which could be construed as the will of God. God's will increasingly was used to justify the policy of Oliver Cromwell as he succumbed to the intoxication of his own success and the pressures of government which that success had thrust upon him.

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