

CHARITY, MORALITY, AND SOCIAL CONTROL:
CLERICAL ATTITUDES IN THE DIOCESE OF
CHESTER, 1715-1795

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Despite the pioneering work of Norman Sykes, who viewed latitudinarianism sympathetically as 'practical Christianity' which placed emphasis on good conduct,¹ in the past historians have presented a rather negative image of the clergy during the eighteenth century. Basil Williams, for example, follows the lead provided by nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals in viewing the Church as spiritually impoverished by political manipulation and lay patronage. He concentrates almost solely on the Church's function as a bulwark of the State, pointing out that at no other time in the nation's history was it 'so entirely subservient to the purposes of civil government as in the eighteenth century'.² With regard to the clergy, he argues that the Church provided most of them with 'a pretty easy way of dawdling away one's time: praying, walking, visiting; and as little study as the heart could wish'.³ According to J. H. Plumb clergymen reaped the benefits of agricultural prosperity, seldom preached, and could do pretty much as they pleased; 'Time hung heavily on their hands. Some took to drink, some to fox hunting, some to local government, some to learning.'⁴

There is some truth in this view of the Anglican clergy, but it is also rather one-sided and in more recent years a new generation of revisionist historians has stressed the positive achievements of the Church during this period, following in Sykes's footsteps. Gerald Cragg, for example,

asserts that despite their common-sense, materialistic approach with its indifference to asceticism, the clergy 'stoutly resisted the rampant immorality and rationalist disbelief of a hard-bitten society'.⁵ In particular, he points to the ethical tone of their sermons, the attempts by Bishops Gibson and Secker to check the traffic in gin, and the support of the clergy for charity and Sunday schools.⁶

Scholarship conducted over the last few years in particular, by historians such as Peter Virgin,⁷ Eric J. Evans,⁸ and David Hempton,⁹ has tended to concentrate on quantifiable data relating to the distribution and value of livings and other sources of clergy income; numbers of clergy, services, and communicants in various dioceses; and other such information, leaving us with a more sympathetic view of the Church during this period. Evans has pointed out that 'the majority of the Church's pluralists were so from economic necessity' and that 'the Achilles heel of the Church was not so much the cynicism and neglect of its clergy as the unequal state of its endowments at every level'.¹⁰ With regard to the episcopate, Hempton concludes that its faults were not so much 'unacceptable wealth and erastian dependency' as a lack of necessary 'prosaic administrative reforms'.¹¹

In order to develop a complete picture, however, it is necessary to pay closer attention to what clergymen thought and said than has hitherto been the case, and this is best done by analysing the literary sources which they left behind them. Material of this kind provides an essential supplement to the quantitative information which historians have exhaustively examined and enables us to understand the motives of the clergy during this period. In this article I shall be examining the collection of published sermons preached by bishops and priests serving the diocese of Chester contained in Chester public library. They reflect the most deeply felt concerns of the local clergy as well as the problems faced by the Church between the years 1715 and 1795. The sermons clearly indicate that the diocesan clergy were anxious to uphold strict moral standards in the face of increasing secularism and hedonism, to combat the challenge to Christian belief presented by the more radical intellectual advances of the Enlightenment, and to promote

the spiritual, moral, and material well-being of the poor through education. This last concern, however, was also influenced by a desire to preserve the hierarchical structure of society by inculcating certain attitudes among the poor.

Two sermons in particular, preached by Bishop Samuel Peploe in 1747¹² and J. H. Mallory in 1795,¹³ deal with the problem of opposition to the Church resulting from bad behaviour among the clergy. Concern about this problem is linked with the desire of the clergy to promote moral behaviour and religious observance, although it is dealt with as a separate issue in the sermons themselves. Taken as a whole, they exhibit a staunch loyalty to the Hanoverian monarchy and the Whig government, coupled with a strong suspicion of Roman Catholicism: familiar attitudes defended with appeals to the nation's history. There is another connection here with the desire to promote religious devotion, as Roman Catholicism is opposed on religious as well as political grounds. Thus the sermons have moral, spiritual, social, political, and historical dimensions which are sometimes connected. In order to understand the attitudes adopted by the clergy in these sermons and the extent to which they reflect the attitudes of the Church on a national level, it is necessary to examine each of these factors in detail, beginning with moral and spiritual matters.

Concern for the moral welfare of rich and poor alike is exhibited by Samuel Peploe, bishop of Chester, in a sermon he preached at the parish church of St Sepulchre on 2 April 1730 for the benefit of the London and Westminster charity schools. He asserts that it is the Christian duty of the rich to assist the poor because 'All Christians without Distinction are Brethren: and all Brethren are equal'. Moreover, this duty is not discharged simply by being 'void of all Malvolency, free from all injurious Acts to every one' because such behaviour at best constitutes 'a negative religion' which 'falls quite short of the Nature and design of Christianity'. Furthermore, he tells the congregation that when men come to be judged by God 'The Pretence of a Charitable Heart will not excuse an uncharitable Hand.' The rich have no reason to be uncharitable because 'God hath made the Rich his Almoners for the Poor and the wealth of the one is a store-house for the other.'¹⁴

This concern with charitable behaviour was already well established among the clergy and was not by any means confined to the diocese of Chester. The Whig controversialist Benjamin Hoadly, a long-serving bishop of Bangor, preached a sermon before King George I in 1717 in which he anxiously expressed the view that 'Virtue and Integrity, as to ourselves and Charity and Beneficence towards others' had been replaced by 'a punctual Exactness in Regard to particular Times, Places, Forms and Modes . . . recommended and practiced under the avowed Name of External Religion'.¹⁵

After justifying his contention that the rich should assist the poor, in this context through the provision of education, Peploe defends the existence of the charity schools by arguing that they have improved the condition of the poor. In doing this he is anxious to defend the whole concept of charity-school education against the kind of criticisms put forward by the writer and economic theorist Bernard Mandeville, who asserted that 'Charity, where it is too extensive, seldom fails of promoting Sloth and Idleness, and is good for little in the Commonwealth but to breed Drones and destroy Industry.'¹⁶

Peploe begins his defence with the assertion 'that the generality of the Poor were very Ignorant and vicious; and that such a deplorable State was too likely to continue, and go from one generation to another, unless some means was used to stop it'. The remedy, he claims, proved to be instruction in the Christian principles in the charity schools which 'shewed the ways of Piety, Peace and Temperance' and where 'Ruggedness of behaviour' can be combated by bringing up children 'in a decent and Modest Carriage'.¹⁷ The idea that the poor are naturally disposed towards dishonest and immoral behaviour which can only be combated through education in charity and Sunday schools is also expressed by Bishop Beilby Porteous in a sermon preached in Chester cathedral on 4 February 1787 for the benefit of the local charity schools and to recommend the creation of a general Sunday school.¹⁸

Porteous, like Peploe before him, reflects the attitude of the typical eighteenth-century English gentleman towards the poorest members of society with his assertion that they

are ignorant of 'the rules of decorum and propriety, have but very imperfect notions of honour, and seldom suffer much from feelings of shame'.¹⁹ This was a view often expressed by popular writers earlier in the century and by Porteous's time it had become deeply ingrained. Writing in 1724, Daniel Defoe asserted that even in times of prosperity 'they grow saucy, lazy, idle and debauch'd',²⁰ whilst in 1737 Jonathan Swift claimed that many of the poor were reduced to starvation 'meerly from their own Idleness, attended with all Manner of Vices, particularly Drunkenness, Thievery and Cheating'.²¹

Porteous claims that they envy their social superiors and so are often 'urged . . . by their wants to transgress the bounds of duty'. He then poses the question: 'What is there but an early sense of religion, a fear of God, and a dread of future punishment that can keep them from doing so?'²² Porteous's conclusion is that without this religious instruction the poor will only turn to dishonesty: 'They will be fraudulent traders, and unfaithful servants; they will be tempted to go from one degree of dishonesty to another, from unfair craft to secret theft; from secret theft to open violence; till they are stopt short by the hand of justice in their career of villainy, and end an abandoned life by an ignominious death.'²³

Both Peploe and Porteous express a view widely held in eighteenth-century society: the view that unless the poor were given some sort of education and religious instruction they would fall into moral depravity. As early as 1713 Richard Steele asserted that the charity schools were needed in order to lift society 'out of its present Degeneracy and Deprivation'.²⁴ Mandeville himself admitted that the idea had become so prevalent that anyone who criticized charity schools was regarded as 'an Uncharitable, Hard-hearted and Inhuman, if not a Wicked, Profane and Atheistical Wretch'.²⁵ It is also true, however, that charitable projects often met with criticism because it was feared that they might upset the social hierarchy by raising the poor above their 'rightful place' in society. Moreover, those who advocated the creation of charity and Sunday schools were anxious to prevent this from happening. These factors are also dealt with by Porteous and Peploe in the charity-school

sermons but I will discuss them when dealing with broadly social, as opposed to purely moral, attitudes.

Before temporarily leaving aside the question of charity and Sunday school education it must be stressed that clerical enthusiasm for it was influenced by the obligation to catechize the young, enjoined by the fifty-ninth canon of 1604. As F. C. Mather points out, parents and employers often failed to ensure that children went to church, and so the charity and Sunday schools provided them with their only opportunity to receive religious instruction and thus the only opportunity for the clergy to perform one of their most sacred duties.²⁶

A more general concern about moral behaviour is exhibited by Bishop Beilby Porteous in a sermon preached in Westminster Abbey in 1779 on the occasion of a general fast. He views the loss of the American colonies and the war with France as a divine punishment in response to immoral behaviour, asserting that too much wealth has been poured into the country, breaking down 'every barrier of morality and religion' and producing 'a scene of wanton extravagance and wild excess, which called loudly for some signal check; and that check it has now received'.²⁷ The idea that political disasters represented God's punishment in return for sin was not uncommon as a homiletic theme. The Reverend John Hoadly, in a sermon preached before the House of Commons in 1717, claimed that just as the sins of the Jewish people of the Old Testament served as an example to succeeding generations, 'so the former Judgments which have been inflicted on this Nation for its sins, are Examples and Admonitions to all the succeeding generations of it'.²⁸ Hoadly views the 'horrors of the Civil War' as one of God's punishments,²⁹ and, just as Porteous sees an excess of wealth as dangerous to morality, so he views 'the Effects of Long Peace and Plenty'³⁰ in the same way.

Porteous recalls the two previous occasions upon which the Lords gathered in the Abbey church to hear a sermon marking the general fast, reminding his congregation that they 'vowed repentance and reformation'. He asks whether they have fulfilled this promise, whether any articles of luxury have been renounced or 'one place of amusement,

one school of debauchery or one house of gaming shut up?' Porteous then discusses the subject of marriage, asking: 'Are the obligations of the nuptial vow more faithfully observed, and fewer applications made to the legislature for the dissolution of that sacred bond?'³⁰ He also wonders whether religious observance and holiness of life have increased, concluding that 'Happy would it be for every one of us, could these questions be answered in the affirmative.'³¹

Porteous also asserts that the practice of worship is offensive to God when it is accompanied by immoral behaviour. The Creator is mocked 'if we are serious for a few hours once a year, and as dissipated as ever all the rest of our lives'.³² In making this assertion he presses home his deep concern for the moral welfare of eighteenth-century society. This was often coupled with concern about a decline in orthodox Christian belief because this was perceived as a root cause of immorality. Consequently, just as Christian education was seen as an antidote to depravity among the poor, a return to traditional Christian belief was viewed as the answer to immorality among other social groups. This is reflected in the concluding section of Porteous's sermon. He proposes a return to 'pure, undefiled religion'³³ and views 'modern philosophy' as one of the evils which 'have constituted a large and most pernicious branch of our commerce with France'.³⁴ Samuel Peploe, in his charity-school sermon, refers to those who 'prefer the Darkness of Nature' and describes them as 'flagrantly wicked'.³⁵ They are accused of attempting to 'introduce Paganism, which is a composition of the grossest Errors and Vices, in the room of the Everlasting Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.³⁶

Peploe's words can be construed as an attack upon the more radical exponents of the deist school of thought whose substitution of reason for revelation in the search for religious as well as scientific truth struck at the basis of orthodox thinking. As Norman Hampson pointedly asserts: 'However orthodox men like Descartes, Locke and Leibniz might be, their Christian orthodoxy was tacked on to systems of thought which were logically viable without it.'³⁷ Consequently, Hampson points out, some thinkers strayed

far beyond the bounds of orthodoxy. The French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), declared that ‘every individual dogma . . . is false when refuted by the clear and distinct perceptions of natural reason’.³⁸ Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) rejected religion as a source of moral values and Benjamin Spinoza (1632–77) concluded that the Old Testament was no more reliable than any other history.

Porteous and Peploe, therefore, are asserting the traditional idea of Christian truth as a revelation from God, not to be tampered with by the flawed reasoning of sinful men, a process which can lead only, in their view, to a decline in moral behaviour. This view was also put forward by clergymen in other parts of the country. Daniel Waterland, a chaplain to King George II, when preaching to clergymen in the archdeaconry of Middlesex in 1732, complained that ‘Infidel Principles’ had taken root in English society. ‘They began to talk them in Shops and Stalls; and the cavils of Spinoza and Hobbes are grown common even to the rabble . . . The Mosaic Account of Creation was represented as meer Allegory and Fable: The Inspiration of Holy Writ so explain’d as to amount to a denial of it.’³⁹ Waterland goes on to claim that the substitution of reason for obedience to divine ordinances completely excludes God, so that atheism and deism are the same ‘in application and practice’.⁴⁰ Moral authority is placed in the hands of men instead of God, thus undermining the sanction ‘which alone can keep it alive in the World’.⁴¹

Nevertheless, orthodox Christians sometimes enlisted the aid of reason in defending traditional beliefs instead of simply asserting the primacy of revealed truth. This is reflected in a sermon preached by Thomas Brooke, rector of Nantwich, in the parish church on 17 April 1731. He begins by explaining that ‘There never was any people so rude and barbarous but what professed some Religion’ and concludes that since most people have always believed in God, it is thus natural.⁴² He also puts forward the view that the best philosophers and reasoners have been ‘substantial Advocates in the cause of Religion’.⁴³ Brooke’s main arguments in favour of God’s existence are concerned with ‘Works of Nature’ and he claims that ‘the Wisdom and Power of God are very apparent from a general view of the World’.⁴⁴

Brooke continues his argument with reference to the human body, which he claims persuaded Galen of God's existence: 'The wonderful Formation of Man, with the Advantage of an erect, comely Posture: that most valuable Endowment of Reason, and the surprising Manner of the Souls operation, these shew the Hand of an all-wise and powerful Maker.'⁴⁵ Turning his attention to other physical phenomena, Brooke describes the moon and stars, asking: 'Can a rational Creature look up towards Heaven and view that large immeasurable Space, wherein these prodigious lights are fixed, and not discover the Almighty Hand that made it, the infinite wisdom that supports it?'⁴⁶ Similarly he argues that the sun 'gives no small testimony to the immense Wisdom and unlimited Power of its Almighty Creator'. He then claims that it is prevented from setting fire to the universe only through the exercise of divine control.⁴⁷ Brooke also discerns the hand of God in the moon's influence over the tides and in its ability to supply light in the darkness.⁴⁸ Finally, the existence of crops, trees, and herbs to provide food, fuel, and medicine are cited as further evidence of the existence of a benign creator.

Brooke's view of God is an essentially deist one, that of the grand architect of the universe whose existence is proved by the order discernible in nature. The approach he adopts in his sermon amounts to what the philosopher J. C. A. Gaskin terms 'the regularity argument'. Gaskin explains that it is based on the fact that 'human artifacts, have an order which is only explainable in terms of the activity of intelligent agents' and that since 'natural physical objects' display a similar order they must be the work of a creator who bears 'some remote analogy to the intelligence of Man'.⁴⁹ Rational arguments for the existence of God were put forward from the time of Aquinas but Brooke uses a type of argument which could be applied to a morally neutral intelligence as well as a benevolent creator. Bishops like Peploe and Porteous were aware of this and suspicious of the new philosophical thinking as a result.

Sermons of this type were being preached against a background of decline in religious attendance in the diocese, as research conducted by R. B. Walker in 1966 clearly shows.⁵⁰ When considering the evidence he presents, how-

ever, it must be borne in mind, as David Hempton has pointed out, that belief and practice could vary a great deal even within the same diocese and so one must be wary of drawing any national projections from local studies.⁵¹ Walker points to low levels of church attendance in a number of areas, drawing evidence from the visitation returns of 1778. West Kirby, for example, had 160 households but only 70–80 Easter communicants although Wallasey fared better with 81 out of 112.⁵² In 1789 the curate of Tattenhall claimed that more than half the population 'never attend a place of worship on the Lord's Day'. At Marbury, which had a population of 350, half 'very seldom' attended.⁵³

The lack of religious observance cannot be attributed to attendance at other places of worship, because Roman Catholics and Dissenters were both a minority in the area.⁵⁴ Walker attributes the decline to factors such as a bad example set by social superiors, a lack of suitable clothing for the poor to wear at church services, and the requirements of an agricultural economy, which involved farm work on Sunday mornings.⁵⁵ However, he fails to consider the possibility that the new rationalist ideas which were being propagated had filtered down to the poor in a crude and simplified form, influencing their attitudes towards the Church. This is the assumption made by Daniel Waterland in London, as we have seen, when he talks about the ideas of Hobbes and Spinoza being made widely known through discussion 'even to the rabble'. In the diocese of Chester, although Porteous condemns the new radical philosophy before an educated audience, Brooke's attempt to prove the existence of God through rational argument is not directed at such a select congregation but at a group of florists assembled in his parish church. Thus the clergy's concern with the intellectual advances of the Enlightenment may well be directly linked to a low level of religious attendance among the poor as well as immorality among other social groups.

Orthodox belief was also undermined by the scandal of idle and immoral clergy which helped to foster indifference and even hostility towards the Church during the eighteenth century. The problems of pluralism, pastoral

neglect, and corrupt and illegal behaviour among the clergy are dealt with by Samuel Peploe in a sermon preached in 1747 and in a more indirect way by J. H. Mallory in 1795. Before considering this material, however, it is worth examining the findings of recent research into these problems.

Eric J. Evans has shown that the practice of plurality was often rendered necessary by the low value of livings. In Leicester the living of St Mary's was worth only £12 and that of St Nicholas's only £6. In 1728 only two of Lincoln's thirteen parishes were worth £13⁵⁶ and in 1736 nearly 70% of the livings in the dioceses of York, Chester, and St David's were below the level of £50 per annum, the minimum considered acceptable in the 'Return Made by the Governors of the Bounty of Queen Anne'. Evans has also conducted an exhaustive analysis of the returns provided for Bishop Gastrell in his visitation of 1717. Thirty-one out of sixty-seven livings were worth less than £10. Of the remainder, nine were worth between £10 and £19, sixteen were worth between £20 and £49, and the rest varied from £50 to £200 in value.⁵⁷ It is not surprising that pluralism existed in circumstances like this although it cannot be denied that throughout the country there were also some wealthy pluralists who brought the Church into disrepute, bishops as well as priests. Moreover, the low value of livings encouraged not only plurality but corrupt and illegal practices among clergymen anxious to increase their earnings; this could serve only to tarnish the image of their calling in the minds of the laity.

On 17 June 1747 Bishop Peploe preached a sermon before the diocesan clergy on the occasion of his visitation of the diocese, in which he dealt with the problem of clerical corruption and the antipathy that it aroused. He begins by referring to the encouragement of prejudice against the clergy; 'They have represented us as Useless and Burdensome, as Idle and Superficial in our ministerial Performances; which, however true it may be in regard to some particular Persons . . . yet surely, it is an unjust Imputation on the Body of the Clergy.'⁵⁸ Although Peploe views the majority of the clergy as innocent of bad behaviour he goes on to describe the ways in which they should discharge their duties and cites instances of pastoral neglect, so the problem must have been quite serious.

He urges them to 'obviate this Evil' through 'Diligence, Faithfulness and Prudence'⁵⁹ and to observe the ordinances of the Church in their administration of the sacraments.⁶⁰ The pastoral duties of visiting the sick and children in schools are also strongly recommended. Peploe then deals with the problem of non-resident clergy and the employment of unlicensed, poorly paid curates. He begins by criticizing those clergymen who possess two livings and reside in one 'but have no residing curate at the other, and seldom, or scarce ever, do any Duty there themselves'.⁶¹ He then expresses his disapproval of those who hold only one living but live outside the parish and employ a curate to discharge their duties for them: 'How such clergymen can in Honour, Justice and Conscience, live by the Labours of their Parishioners, without spending Time and Personal Pains among them, I leave to their cool and retired thoughts.'

Furthermore, despite the fact that it was the task of the bishop to license curates and appoint their salaries, Peploe had discovered that 'some Incumbents not only take upon them to appoint Curates in such Churches without being Licenc'd, but fix their salaries also, without any application to the Diocesan, as the Law directs'.⁶² Perhaps, in this last criticism, Peploe is being too harsh. If an incumbent held two livings, each of very low value, he may well have considered himself quite justified in paying his curate a low salary and, arguably, would not have been behaving unreasonably if he had chosen to act in this way.

It appears that the diocese was still affected by such problems in 1795 when J. H. Mallory, rector of Mobberley, preached a sermon in the cathedral on the occasion of a general ordination. He adopts a far more tolerant view of clerical foibles than Peploe, asking his congregation, 'will you use no rules of health unless you are sure your physician uses them himself? Will you not use a friend's advice in some doubt or difficulty, unless you are sure he is infallible?'⁶³ This suggests that the behaviour of the clergy had aroused hostility towards the Church and this impression is reinforced by Mallory's assertion that 'great indulgences are necessary with respect to their office and characters' and his claim that those who hate the clergy are usually 'wicked and profane'.⁶⁴ This hatred was probably

aroused by the kind of corruption that existed at the time of Bishop Peploe's visitation in 1747. In that year the Reverend Peregrine Gastrell, the chancellor of the diocese, published *An enquiry into the exercise of some parts of ecclesiastical jurisdiction in three letters to the Right Reverend father in God, Samuel, lord bishop of Chester with a preface.*

In his third letter Gastrell defended himself against charges of corruption and pointed to the existence of illegal activities in the diocese with a demand that Peploe take action in the matter. He began by explaining that penance imposed by the Church could be commuted through payment of a sum of money to be used for charitable purposes and that the power to do this lay with the ecclesiastical judge. This privilege was to be 'Exercised with knowledge and discretion, for the honour of the church, the good of offenders, and the welfare of the public; not prostituted for filthy lucre'.⁶⁵ Peploe had prosecuted Gastrell in the court of York on the grounds that he had illegally appropriated and abused the power of admitting commutation for penance but Gastrell asserted in this letter that the acting rural dean, his agents, and his actuary were the real guilty parties. He accused them of having persuaded the diocesan clergy to excommunicate offending parishioners illegally and then commute the sentence without the presence of a public notary or the recording of payments in the public registry.⁶⁶ Gastrell suggested that since no official records had been kept 'May it not be concluded that the money, so taken, hath been ill applied and embezzled?'⁶⁷ He concluded that the clergy had been 'injuriously treated', offenders 'wronged of their money', the public deprived of funds from commutations, and the Church's image debased. He then urged Peploe to 'repress a practice which is attended by so many evil consequences'.⁶⁸

In the cases to which Gastrell refers, it seems the culprits are those who hold office in the Church and do not have the excuse of poverty, but the more widespread practices resulting from plurality which Peploe mentions can be seen as the inevitable consequence of the low value of livings in the diocese. Furthermore, both Peploe and Gastrell are strongly critical of bad behaviour among the clergy, and Mallory attempts to soften its effects in his sermon of 1795. This

shows that some clergymen at least were aware of these problems and anxious to do something about them.

The provision of education for the children of the poor was another matter of great concern to the clergy during this period and one which they shared with the more affluent members of society. It found its expression in support for the charity schools, institutions run by governors accountable to the subscribers who financed them. In 1723 1,379 provincial charity schools were recorded and the S.P.C.K. campaigned vigorously on their behalf as well as lending support to the annual festivals of the London charity schools.⁶⁹ Charity schools remained a popular, if controversial, object of philanthropy but their numbers were static and interest declined towards the end of the century. The school at Isleworth (Middlesex), for example, came to rely solely on charity sermons and bequests and at Stamford the withdrawal of subscribers forced the school to lower its standards and reduce numbers.⁷⁰

Despite these later problems the clergy continued to support charity-school education, promoting it not only as a way of improving moral character but as a means of social control, a way of preserving the hierarchical structure of eighteenth-century society. This is reflected most clearly in Peplow's charity-school sermon. On the subject of caring for children in such institutions he says, 'The plainest dress, and plainest food, must be fittest for such as live on the Bounty of others . . . where there is a stock to enable the Trustees to place any to a particular calling, the lowest Occupations, and laborious Business must generally be considered most proper'.⁷¹ In other words, the poor should be prevented from rising to a higher position in society. Peplow also recommends that the children spend time 'employ'd in some sort of labour' because 'this would keep down any vain aspirings after a more soft and easie way of life than can be intended for them. It would . . . prepare them to *earn their Bread by the sweat of their Brows*'.⁷² Peplow also views education as a means of inculcating allegiance 'to the Government under which we have the Blessing to live', expressing his fear of social disorder: 'What appeals have been made, and do not cease, to the lowest of the People, a giddy populace, against the Wisdom and Honesty of the

Administration? It is the Duty, of the Poor especially, to study to be quiet, and to do their own business.⁷³

Bishop Porteous takes a similar view in his charity-school sermon of 1787 with reference to his appeal for money to fund the creation of a 'general sunday-school' which would assist those poor children completely without education. Although anxious to deny accusations that such schools 'diffused too much learning among the great mass of the common people, and thereby indispose them for the low and laborious employments which they are destined to fill in this life', Porteous agrees that 'the education of the poor may be overdone, may be carried too far; and if you give to a peasant the accomplishments of a gentleman or the learning of a scholar you not only do a very useless but a very pernicious thing'.⁷⁴ It is not true, therefore, that Porteous merely attempts to quell the fears of his congregation, because he shares the attitudes which lie behind those fears. Moreover, he argues that since in charity schools the poor are taught to 'read their bibles, understand their catechism, and attend divine worship', they can only become better servants for their masters: 'Will any master of a family, will any farmer in England object to a servant so educated, and prefer an idle, ignorant, beggarly vagrant out of the streets?'⁷⁵

Before making his appeal for a Sunday school, Porteous extolls the virtues of the Bluecoat hospital in Chester in which boys were 'taught to read, write and cast accounts'. He believes that this education 'is suited to their stations and the laborious occupations to which they are destined' and points out that in such schools children learn the values of discipline, restraint, submission, and obedience.⁷⁶ Thus, like Peploe, he promotes education as a means of keeping the poor in their place and as a training ground for their future employment. In putting forward these arguments Peploe and Porteous express views which were widely held in eighteenth-century society. As Paul Langford has pointed out, 'The schoolroom as a form of inexpensive, even profitable poor relief, was a familiar concept in the early eighteenth century, as it was to be again during the industrial expansion of the late eighteenth century.'⁷⁷

Before moving on from this subject, one other point must

be reiterated: the sermons preached by Peploe and Porteous indicate that there was not necessarily any difference in philosophy between those who supported this form of philanthropy and those who opposed it. Bernard Mandeville, who, as we have seen, vigorously opposed charity-school education, asserted that a man who had been taught 'to Read, Write and Cypher' would be unable to 'make a good Hireling and serve a Farmer for a pitiful reward; at least he is not so fit for it as a Day labourer that has always been employ'd about the Dung Cart, and remembers not that he has ever lived otherwise'. Consequently he sees giving the poor even the most basic education as a threat to the social and economic system for 'No Creatures submit contentedly to their Equals, and should a horse know as much as a Man, I should not desire to be his Rider.'⁷⁸ Porteous and Peploe are equally keen to preserve the social hierarchy but they differ from Mandeville with regard to the means of achieving this. They assert that the poor can be controlled only through education but he believes that such control is effectively maintained only if they are kept in ignorance.

The sermons as a whole demonstrate the Erastian nature of the Hanoverian Church and its adherence to Whig ideology, traditionally regarded as having been based on John Locke's two *Treatises on government*, published in 1690 and deemed to have furnished the theoretical apology for the Glorious Revolution of 1688, though they were actually written much earlier and later applied in its defence. Maurice Ashley exemplified the attitude of past historians when he asserted that Locke 'influenced his contemporaries in the realm of philosophy as profoundly as did the discoveries of Newton in the schools of science'⁷⁹ and that 'His ideas endured as the characteristic political philosophy of the governing classes of Great Britain for about two hundred years.'⁸⁰ Harold Laski went even further, claiming that Locke 'announced the advent of the modern system of parliamentary government'.⁸¹

The treatises contain Locke's most radical ideas: the view that all men are born free and equal but voluntarily placed themselves under a trusteeship to protect life, liberty, and property, and the idea that 'all authority in the state is

derived from the voluntary contract of its members and is limited by its terms. Hence any infringement of the contract . . . nullifies it and the community is thereupon entitled to resist and at need depose that authority'.⁸² Taken to its logical conclusion, this 'social contract' theory of kingship and government could be used to justify radically changing the constitution and deposing an unsatisfactory ruler. Past historians have often assumed that it not only provided the justification for the overthrow of King James II but also became enshrined in the Bill of Rights, the Toleration Act, and the Act of Settlement, creating the system which is upheld in some of the sermons that I have studied. However, in recent years revisionist scholarship has shown that Locke's more radical ideas did not influence this system, or Whig ideology in general, as much as was previously supposed. As J. C. D. Clark has pointed out, 'It is now established that, under William III and Anne, Locke was scarcely cited even in defence of the Revolution itself, let alone in defence of the forms of government which Victorians were to see the Revolution as intended to establish.' In fact, the idea that the Revolution occurred because a 'mythic contract' had been broken was not one which appealed to most Whigs⁸³ and during this period Locke was better known for the Arian views expressed in his religious works than he was for his controversial political theories.⁸⁴

H. T. Dickinson points out that Whig ideology was influenced far more by the appeal to an ancient constitution than by the Lockean contract theory.⁸⁵ This ancient constitution was believed to be shrouded in the mists of antiquity, its origins lying in the Anglo-Saxon period when men of property formed the witan to advise the king.⁸⁶ The theory that evolved was thus based on history and tradition rather than human reason, with Magna Carta appealed to as proof of the fact that subjects could sometimes legitimately resist a monarch in order to secure certain liberties. It denied the concept of absolute monarchy and sanctioned a political order dominated by men of property. Gradually, it became conflated with the contract theory by philosophers like Daniel Whitby who referred to an 'original contract' which William the Conqueror made 'with the barons and the nobility and the commonalty of England'.⁸⁷ Richard Hooker

wrote of a contractual relationship of trust between ruler and ruled which was also very influential.⁸⁸ This more conservative ideology was preferable to theories about natural and inalienable rights which some Whigs feared might be used to justify social revolution. Thus Sir William Blackstone preferred to argue, as some moderate Tories did, that James II was not really overthrown; by voluntarily leaving the country he had abdicated so that the throne was left vacant for William III.⁸⁹ Moreover, the idea gradually developed that supreme authority rested in the legislature of king, lords, and commons, a theory acceptable to many moderate Tories.⁹⁰

In an assize sermon preached in Chester cathedral on 10 October 1717 Walter Offley, chaplain to Lord Herbert of Cherbury and rector of Barthomley in Cheshire, showed himself to be an exponent of this traditional Whig philosophy. He preaches loyalty to the Church of England in contrast to 'the gross Idolatory, and the insupportable Tyranny of the Papacy', describing its Protestant faith as 'the best Support to Government, by maintaining the due Rights of Prince and People'.⁹¹ In typical Whig fashion, he views William III as a deliverer from the unjust reign of James II, claiming that he was 'touch'd with a sense of the Nation's Injuries' and 'found himself necessitated to see these Disorders redress'd in a Parliament'.⁹² However, far from expounding the Lockean contract theory, Offley points out that King James voluntarily fled the kingdom and William was then offered the vacant throne, an occurrence he attributes to the mercy of God. He then turns his attention to William's critics, condemning those who 'trauced his Title, his Actions and their own Deliverance' before describing him in glowing terms as 'The restorer of our Laws and Liberties, and the Preserver of our Church and Nation'.

Offley concludes that 'upon this very Foundation, under His present Majesty, is our happy Establishment settled'.⁹³ However, he fears that the constitution remains under threat from those who 'do us secretly all the Dishonour and Mischief they can',⁹⁴ in other words secret Jacobites undermining the State from within. He also refers to 'The late Unnatural Rebellion, which took heart from the want of

sufficient Provision then in the Nation to oppose it'.⁹⁵ A Jacobite club existed in Cheshire at the time of both rebellions and in 1715 it enjoyed influential support, numbering both Lord Barrymore and Peter Legh of Lyme among its members. For this reason those loyal to the Hanoverian regime in Chester felt especially threatened at the time of the first rebellion and this is reflected in a sermon preached by Christopher Sudell, rector of Holy Trinity church, entitled *The people and soldiers duty in this present time of war and rebellion*,⁹⁶ in which he defended the Whig government. He referred to the approach of 'those Rebels against God and our Excellent Constitution in Church and State',⁹⁷ describing the fight against them as 'the defence of everything that is sacred and dear to us'.⁹⁸ These passionate words were no doubt given added urgency by the knowledge that there were potential rebels in Chester itself.

In fact there were staunch Tories and Jacobite sympathizers among the clergy and one should not be misled by the content of the sermons into assuming that the local clergy were all supporters of the political establishment. Francis Gastrell (1662–1724), who was bishop of Chester from 1714 until his death, was a High Church Tory who expressed his sympathy 'for a houseless Prince' in a letter to his secretary in 1715.⁹⁹ The Reverend Henry Prescott, deputy registrar of the diocese of Chester from 1686 until his death in 1719, was another Tory Jacobite whose sympathies are clearly revealed in his diary.¹⁰⁰

However, from 1726 until 1752 Samuel Peploe was the bishop of Chester. A strong supporter of the Whig constitution, he encouraged the building of new churches to counteract the influence of Roman Catholicism. In 1732, in a sermon preached before the members of the House of Lords in Westminster Abbey, Peploe makes his views quite clear. He condemns Roman Catholicism for its creation of 'an universal Monarchy in the Church; a Power in the Church over the State; an absolute Obedience to the Doctrines of Men; or a Power in some to bind the consciences of others by infallible Determinations'.¹⁰¹ Politically, Peploe shows himself to be a conservative Whig, asserting that civil government has been laid down by 'the Spirit of God' but condemning 'the asserting an arbitrary Power in

the Prince, where a Legal Liberty, and Property in the Subject, are part of the constitution: The Doctrine of absolute hereditary Right: A Doctrine which if attempted, to be put in Execution, would soon set all the World together by the Ears'.¹⁰²

Sermons such as these bear out Stephen Baskerville's contention that those which were published during this period 'come almost exclusively from the pens of reliable Whig clerics whose approved homilies could be relied upon not to embarrass the local representatives of the Hanoverian regime with unsubtle allusions to Divine right and indefeasible hereditary succession'.¹⁰³ However, the controversial sermon preached on 24 March 1751 'by a now Persecuted clergyman'¹⁰⁴ was the work of a High Church Tory whose identity has been revealed by Baskerville. He was Thomas Parry, rector of St Bridget's in Chester.¹⁰⁵ Parry was already in trouble with the diocesan authorities as a result of his past behaviour, and the offence caused by his sermon was to make matters even worse. In 1748 he libelled Bishop Peploe in an obituary notice for Peregrine Gastrell, the chancellor of the diocese, published in the *London Evening Post*. He was called to account for it in January 1749 and promised to treat the bishop in a more Christian fashion in the future. Nevertheless, in May 1750 Peploe invoked the forty-ninth canon of the canons of 1604 in order to prevent him from preaching without a licence.¹⁰⁶ As his homily shows, Parry was not so easily silenced.

In a preface to the published version of his sermon Parry explains that he had offered to preach at a parish church in Chester 'But in a very few Days, I received an Order to inhibit me from the Pulpit . . . an extraordinary Proceeding against an instituted Rector.' The hapless cleric goes on to point out that such an action was usually 'a punishment for some Demerits and Offences; but here, Behold! a sentence is passed previous even to a Hearing, Defence or Conviction'.¹⁰⁷ Parry was then summoned to appear before a consistory court at which the prosecutor turned out to be a member of the cathedral chapter 'and my very Near Ecclesiastical Neighbour', a person he claims never to have knowingly offended and whom he alleges was absent from the church 'when this impeached Oration was uttered'.

Furthermore, Parry claims that during the proceedings 'Articles were exhibited containing words which my mouth had not spoken'. Consequently, he decided to publish his sermon so that the public might judge it for themselves.¹⁰⁸

The citation in the consistory court, however, alleges that Parry 'endeavoured to impune and confute the doctrine preached by another minister of the Church of England' who had preached a sermon on the anniversary of the execution of Charles I, taking Romans 13:7 as his text. Parry is accused of having suggested that this clergyman insulted King Charles's memory and committed 'Treason against the King of Kings for detracting from the meaning of the Holy Scriptures'.¹⁰⁹ Parry's sermon is actually based on the same text and comprises an attack upon the idea that Locke's view of man as he exists in a state of nature can be defended by an appeal to it. He ridicules those whom he claims propound this view: 'They will allow God made the World, but yet they will not allow God to govern *his own world*: They say that he ordain'd Government in it, but left it to the People to chuse their own Governors . . . and so they enter'd into a contract to be subject to Laws, being originally created in a State of Nature, and equally; and they reserv'd to themselves the Power to judge, depose, and change their Governors, whenever they violated the Original contract.'¹¹⁰

Parry goes on to describe this view as 'a mere Chimera, and directly repugnant to St. Paul's scheme of Government, who makes God the Fountain of all Power, and the Powers that be, to be ordained of God i.e. that he designed some to be in Power *and above others and not all to be in an equal condition*.' Thus any republican notions based on the text are a distortion 'perverted and contrary to St. Paul's meaning'. If Parry is suggesting that his Whig colleagues interpreted the text in this way he is guilty of distorting their opinions. As we have seen, many of them were frightened by the radical implications of Locke's work and would certainly not have favoured republicanism, a position espoused by a minority known as the Commonwealth Men. Moreover, as the charity-school sermons preached by Peplow and Porteous show, Whigs as well as Tories took it for granted that inequality was part of a divinely ordained social system in

which some were born to govern and others to be governed.

Later in his sermon Parry gives his own interpretation of the text, asserting that St. Paul wished to correct the assumption of some Christians who had been Jews 'that they were not obliged to obey the Heathen Magistrates and Idolators . . . and would have none for their King but Christ'.¹¹¹ He then refers to Romans 8:1 in which 'St. Paul tells them . . . let every soul be subject to the higher powers, which were in the Hands of Caligula, Claudius, or Nero'.¹¹² This text is then used to attack the republican government of Holland and the ancient republics of Sparta and Athens, which in Parry's view resulted from unlawful rebellion against legitimate rulers.¹¹³ Thus he contradicts the whole tenor of Whig philosophy. If it was unlawful for subjects in ancient times to rebel against Nero and Caligula, then surely the deposition of James II was equally unlawful? The assertion that people were obliged blindly to obey even the most brutal and tyrannical rulers who could wield absolute power over them struck at the heart of the Whig constitution which recognized the limitation of a monarch's powers by the representatives of the people and the existence of a contractual relationship involving mutual responsibilities between ruler and ruled. Moreover, Holland's role in the revolt of the Netherlands against the rule of Hapsburg Spain in the sixteenth century was regarded by Whigs as an act of heroic resistance against papist tyranny.

In the latter part of his sermon Parry criticizes the Low Church party who were the most powerful in the Church and State, asserting that if those 'who come to Church with Presbyterian Hearts and Fanatical Spirits, went to the conventicle, and did not pretend to be Members of a sound and apostolical Church they would thereby be guilty of less Hypocrisy, than by continuing in her'.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, he condemns their anti-Catholic stance: 'the Word Popery, has of late been made more a Term of Faction and Sedition than of a Distinction of Religion, as it ought only to be' whilst 'antipapists' are accused of representing others as papists 'as if they were the only true protestants'.¹¹⁵ It is not surprising, given his previous behaviour, that Parry was called to account for his controversial remarks.

This completes my analysis of the sermons which I have

studied and it is now time to draw some final conclusions. The clergy in the diocese of Chester concerned themselves with every aspect of the society in which they lived. Through the provision of Christian education they sought to replace poverty with a measure of prosperity, ignorance with a measure of knowledge, crime with honesty, and a premature end on the gallows with long lives of Christian devotion. They cared deeply about the problems of doubt and debauchery, seeking to sow the seeds of faith among those whom they believed destined for damnation if they were allowed to suffer pastoral neglect and, whether Whig or Tory, they struggled to promote cherished political ideals. Even the behaviour of corrupt and indifferent clergymen, despite the hostility it engendered, can be viewed sympathetically in the light of difficult economic circumstances and in any case, vigorous attempts were made by concerned clergymen to combat such behaviour. In short, the clergy in the diocese of Chester were motivated by deeply held convictions rather than complacency or self-interest.

NOTES

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