

Shifting Concerns for Purity: The Separatist Tradition, Puritanism, and Toleration

Separatists belonged to the fringe of the radical Puritan groups of the Elizabethan and early Stuart period, and they were an ingredient of the so-called “radical soup” of their day.¹ To distinguish them from moderate Puritans or from Presbyterians, they were also called “Brownists” or “Barrowists”, after the names of two of their early leaders, Robert Browne (1550?-1633) and Henry Barrow (1550-1593)². The Church of England, until quite late in the seventeenth century, was fond of calling them and their offshoot, as George Gifford did in 1590, the “Donatists of England”, because not unlike the fourth-century Donatists, their offense had more in common with schism than with heretical beliefs.³

Although they are sometimes treated by historians as clearly distinct from mainstream Elizabethan Puritanism to the point that some would even deny them the name “Puritan” altogether, Separatists and Puritans no less clearly started from the same background assumption(s), as we shall see. Furthermore, the many controversies between them, especially on ecclesiology, are best seen in the light of this fundamental kinship: Separatists were an embarrassment to moderate Puritans such as Gifford himself and to Presbyterians like Thomas Cartwright precisely because they shared so much (even if their disagreement on a number of key

¹ For a description of the « radical soup » (word and thing), see R. J. Acheson, *Radical Puritans in England 1550–1660*, London, Longman, 1990.

² On Browne’s life and works, see Leland Carlson’s introduction to his edition of Browne’s writings: L. H. Carlson and A. Peel (eds.), *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne, Elizabethan Non-Conformist Texts*, vol. II, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1953.

³ George Gifford, *A Short Treatise against the Donatists of England, whome we call Brownists*, London, 1590. Gifford characterised their error as the “heresy of perfection” (*To the reader*, p. iv).

ecclesiological issues ran also deep), and because Conformists could have a field day of pointing out the similarities between them.⁴ All of them thought (with varying degrees) that the Elizabethan settlement had left the Church of England insufficiently reformed in matters pertaining to liturgy, worship and ecclesiastical government (especially what was called “Church discipline”), even though most of them conceded that it was (mostly) doctrinally sound.⁵

A number of these “godly people”, true “Christian professors” or “forward Protestants”, as they liked to call themselves, were calling loudly for a further reformation, as we’ve seen in the previous chapter. A tiny minority among them eventually decided “*not to tarry for the magistrate*”, and as a matter of fact, “*not to tarry for anie*”, as Robert Browne claimed in one of his most famous pamphlets.⁶ These radicals took the dramatic step of separating themselves from a Church of England that they thought was, in the end, no church at all, and even downright antichristian, a characterisation and behaviour that departed sharply from what mainstream Puritans were willing to condone right up to the Civil war.

Early Separatism at any given time involved probably no more than a few hundred, at the most a few thousand believers and a handful of clergy, even though they attracted an attention far disproportionate to their numbers (precisely because they were a thorn in the side of mainstream Puritanism). Furthermore, after the mid-1590s and until their relative revival of the late

⁴ To give but one example: in his *Treatise*, Gifford keeps referring to Geneva and he quotes both Calvin and Beza as if they were authorities that the Separatists should defer to, which clearly implies that he thought that he was admonishing Reformed brothers.

⁵ For a still useful synthesis on the Separatists’ background, see Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, vol. I, *From the Reformation to the French Revolution*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978, chap. 1, p. 7-76.

⁶ Robert Browne, *A Treatise of reformation without tarying for anie, and of the wickednesse of those preachers which will not reforme till the Magistrate commaunde or compell them*, Middelburg, 1582.

1630s and during the Civil war and Interregnum, they almost disappeared from the public scene as most of them were either in exile (mostly in the Netherlands) or in hiding in England.

Why the Separatists matter

One surprising and at first glance extremely paradoxical answer would be that it is within the Separatist tradition or among those strongly influenced by it that we find quite a few advocates of a tolerationist stance, which contributed directly to the demise or the implosion of Puritanism in the 1640s and during the following decades.

It is well known that one of the earliest principled defences of full-blown toleration in English, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, came from general Baptists such as John Smyth, Thomas Helwys and Leonard Busher, and the first two had originated from a Separatist milieu, even if later, under Mennonite influence, their religious identity shifted away from Puritanism and came closer to Continental Anabaptism.⁷ But others, such as Henry Jacob and John Robinson (whose spiritual offspring would matter hugely in the future), kept firmly within the Puritan fold, and they aired similar ideas at times.⁸ We can also point to the fact that many advocates of toleration during the 1640s, arguably the richest decade for

⁷ For the distinction between « general » and « particular » (Calvinist) Baptists, see *Glossaire* and B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, Didcot, Baptist Historical Society, 1996.

⁸ John Robinson (1575-1625) was of course the religious leader of the Separatist group that eventually left England (and the Netherlands) for New England on board *the Mayflower*. Timothy George and others have claimed that Robinson could well be the missing link between the sixteenth-century Separatists and the « Independents » of the seventeenth century. See T. George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition* [1982], Macon (GA), Mercer University Press, 2005.

toleration debates in the entire history of the English-speaking world⁹, were more or less directly indebted to the Separatist or the semi-Separatist traditions; this was certainly the case with the so-called Independents and their allies (see Laurent Curelly's chapter in this volume), as it was for even more radical figures such as William Walwyn (in *Toleration justified*) or Roger Williams and his highly controversial *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*.¹⁰

What counts as a “principled” defence of toleration is of course open to debate: it is notoriously difficult to assess the degree of sincerity of persecuted minority groups under pressure. It has been repeatedly said (quite rightly) that during the early modern period toleration was “*the loser’s creed*”¹¹, a kind of special pleading embraced when and only when a religious group found itself at the wrong end of the persecuting rod. More often than not, it was a doctrine swiftly abandoned when their fortunes changed. Such pleas could naturally be deemed “sincere” in the sense that they called for the toleration of the truth, not of heretical beliefs: truth entails the right to be tolerated, while error has no rights whatsoever, so the Golden Rule of “doing unto others” could be easily bypassed in these matters from an early modern point of view. Yet to some extent we can recognize the consistency of tolerationist positions by examining the logic

⁹ For an overview (a rather exhaustive one) of the toleration debates of this period, see W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1938-1940, vol. III and vol. IV: “From the Convention of the Long Parliament to the Restoration, 1640-1660”.

¹⁰ On Williams, see Richard Reinitz’s assessment of his relation to the Separatist tradition: R. Reinitz, “The Typological Argument for Religious Toleration: The Separatist Tradition and Roger Williams”, *Early American Literature*, vol. 5, n°1, Spring 1970, p. 74-110. For a recent book extolling Roger William as an American hero for his role in promoting principled toleration, see Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, New York, Basic Books, 2008, and M. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance*, Cambridge (MA), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

¹¹ A. Walsham, *Charitable Hatred, Tolerance and Intolerance in England 1500-1700*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006, introduction, p. 3.

of their premises. In this respect, three principles within the Separatist tradition stand out as particularly relevant: first, separation of Church and State, starting with a strong denial of the authority of civil authorities in religious matters. Second, the ideal of the Church as a corporation made up of willing members and the extolling of religion as voluntary: as Robert Browne famously put it, “*Let them know that the Lord’s people is of the willing sorte*”¹². Lastly, as a logical consequence of the former two, the fact that they generally rejected strongly any use of coercion and compulsion in religious matters, arguing as John Robinson did that “*neither God is pleased with unwilling worshipers, nor Christian societies bettered, nor the persons themselves neither, but the plaine contrary in all three.*”¹³

The interesting paradox is that some Separatists eventually came to argue in favour of toleration from a matrix of extremely intolerant views. It is of course always possible to argue in favour of toleration from a Christian standpoint in a way that is fully compatible with contemporary liberal beliefs: for instance, by invoking Jesus’s inspiring example or Christian moral principles such as charity, brotherly love, and so on. It is a fact that many Christians have repeatedly resorted to these justifications throughout history, especially in recent times. Such is emphatically not the case with Separatists (which is another way to point out that they were *not* contemporary Christians): but the interesting twist is that some of them eventually came to defend toleration not because they had become *more*, but in fact *less* tolerant than their neighbours.

¹² “*In the meane time let them knowe that the Lord’s people is of the willing sorte. They shall come unto Zion and inquire the way to Jerusalem, not by force nor compulsion, but their faces thitherward [...] for it is the conscience and not the power of man that will drive us to seeke the Lordes Kingdome.*” (R. Browne, *A Treatise of reformation without tarying for anie*, Middelburg, 1582, p. 11).

¹³ J. Robinson, *Essayes; or, Observations Divine and Morall*, 2^e éd., Londres, 1638, p. 89.

Reasons for secession: purity issues

The secession from the Church of England was justified by a number of reasons but we will here focus on the reasons linked with purity issues. Separatists shared with mainstream Puritans, and specifically with early English Presbyterians, the judgment that the Church of England retained far too many aspects of the Popish Church. They longed for a purely reformed Church eventually rid of such abominations. Many Presbyterians, like Thomas Cartwright who was later to enter the polemical fray against Separatists, had condemned the state of the Church of England in very much the same terms during the Admonition controversy (for the so-called Admonition Controversy, see the previous chapter). What initially divided Separatists from mainstream puritans seemed to be a very thin line indeed: the decision that the abuses could definitely not be reformed from within and that it implied a separation from such an Antichristian church. Mainstream puritans decided to bear with it and go on “tolerating” abuses, the Separatists could not, and that is one sense in which they can be said to have become less tolerant.¹⁴ The continuity explains how much the frontier between them, though real enough, created an uneasy situation on both sides of the divide: hence the posture of “semi-separatism” of ministers like Henry Jacob, or the quasi-Separatism of many “moderate” Puritan practices, or even the “silent” or “quiet” Separatism of some New England Congregationalists. It can be therefore argued, backed with strong evidence, that there was indeed a

¹⁴ On « moderate Puritans » and the spectrum of attitude *vis-à-vis* the Church of England that they represented, see Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982 ; on Separatist-Puritan controversies, see P. Collinson, “The cohabitation of the faithful with the unfaithful”, dans O. Grell *et al.* (ed.), *From Persecution to Toleration*, *op. cit.*, p. 51-76.

continuum of attitudes within the puritan fold, shades of grey between the black and white of separation.

What prompted the Separatists to go their separate way was first of all a matter of degree, the outrage they felt towards a situation they thought had become intolerable in the light of their religious commitment and protestant zeal (in that sense, they clearly were the hottest among the “hotter sort of Protestants”). But quickly, the very definition and nature of what a true church is and ought to be became the main bone of contention between Separatists and mainstream Puritans, who had kept alive, along with Luther, Calvin and the vast majority of sixteenth-century magisterial protestants, the dream of a reformed universal church and the Constantinian alliance of Church and State.

The Separatists attacked fiercely not only the Church of England, but the very bases of any church organized on a territorial basis and on a national scale. Most of them, though not all of them at first, came to reject the notion of a parish-based church, and many, for the same reason, rejected the idea of a national church, some even cast doubts on the applicability of the concept of an “elect nation” among Christians. John Robinson for instance was fond of mentioning in passing (and with a sneer) “*your English people*” whenever he had to refer to flocks other than his.¹⁵

The main reason for this rejection was a brand of Christian perfectionism: the invisible church is made of Saints from many parts of the world, ultimately known only to God, but the visible church has to be as purified as possible, and that, very visibly so. Since the number of the elect is painfully small, any broad church is bound to accept high levels of toxic

¹⁵ J. Robinson, *A Justification of Separation from the Church of England against Mr Richard Bernard his invective, intituled, the Separatists Schisme*, s. l., 1610, p. 8.

waste in its midst, and for the Separatists, the Church of England was a poisonous mixture of the Elect and the Damned. As Robert Browne wrote in 1583 in *A True and Short Declaration*: “*to pollute the Lord’s spiritual temple by mingling the cleane and the wretched together [is] the cause of all sinne*”¹⁶ and it is a matter of damnation. He repeatedly argued that such “toleration” was absolutely intolerable, because suffering wickedness is itself a sign of wickedness. In his answer to Thomas Cartwright’s letter to Robert Harrison, he stated quite clearly that one wicked man was enough to make void the covenant with God for the whole congregation that would “tolerate” this man: “*if among many good livers one wicked man were founde [...] then the covenant is broken.*”¹⁷ In this context, everyone had better be their brother’s keeper indeed. According to Browne, English bishops were in the wrong precisely because they tolerated too much, “*they wilfully tolerate the things which are against Christ*”¹⁸ ; “*by toleration, they make unlawful things lawful*”¹⁹. Browne could think of no better insult to smear bishops and moderate Puritan clergymen with than to call them “*tolerating preachers*”²⁰. In *The Life and manners of all true Christians* (1582), he hit an even harsher note, meant to be final: “*Antichrist tolerates*”²¹.

¹⁶ R. Browne [Anon.], *A True and Short Declaration*, s.l.n.d. [1583], p. 5.

¹⁷ “*If among many good livers, one wicked man were founde [...] then the Covenant is broken and disanulled with them all. [...] To have a filthie polluted profession in publique assemblies, is to make all other profession filthy and polluted.*” (R. Browne, *An Answere to Master Cartwright his Letter for joyning with the English Churches*, London, s. d. [1583 ou 1585], p. 8)

¹⁸ R. Browne, *A True and Short Declaration*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁹ R. Browne, *A Treatise of reformation*, op. cit., p. 16)

²⁰ “*Yee tolerating Preachers, this you get by your tolerating, to have no name amonge the righteous.*” (*Ibid.*, p. 17)

²¹ “*How is Antichrist their Priest? [...] hee tolerates, and dispensest with wickednes to justifie inequitie.* » (R. Browne, *A Booke which sheweth the life and manners of all true Christians, and howe unlike they are unto Turkes and Papistes, and Heathen folke*, Middelburgh, 1582, p. 26)

Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, during a conference they had with ministers sent to convince them in 1590 (they were safely held in jail and later to be hanged) stated quite clearly that “*the unworthiness and confusion of the people*” in the so-called Church of England was their main reason to secede from it, and they mentioned it first in their list of grievances. Such “*monstruous confusion and commixture*”²² could not be endured by true believers. Later generations of Separatists persisted in viewing the Church of England, in the words of John Robinson, as a “*confused heap*”²³ (he clearly almost meant “*dunghill*”).

The Separatists certainly did not have a monopoly on purity. As the historian Robert Moore has argued, the formation of a persecuting society in the Middle Ages hinged in part on such notions of purity: heresy and schism were systematically compared to leprosy, a spiritual plague and infectious disease that was to be annihilated by the vigorous and combined actions of the Church and the secular arm.²⁴ Heretics were burnt at the stake, sometimes with their books and often after their tongues had been cut off: besides vindicating the honour and the glory of God, such radical punishment was pragmatically meant to stop spreading a soul-killing disease. “Infection”, “poison” and “pollution” were more than just metaphors. The medieval clergy was entrusted with the care of souls, and they were the watchdogs of all the lands enclosed within the walls of Western Christendom. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has reminded us

²² Anon., *A Collection of Certain Letters and Conferences Lately passed betwixt certaine Preachers & Two Prisoners in the Fleet*, s. l., 1590, p. 16); “*What a monstrous confusion and commixture [...].*” (*ibid.*, p. 25).

²³ “*This confused heap.*” (J. Robinson, *A Just and Necessarie Apologie of certain Christians no lesse contumeliously then commonly called Brownists or Barrowists*, s. l., 1625, p. 65). This expression is used several times in the pamphlet.

²⁴ See R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society. Power and Deviance in Western Europe 950–1250*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, esp. p. 45 *sq.* for the issue of leprosy and p. 100 *sq.* for the fear of contamination and its social overtones.

how religious conceptions of what is pure and impure had to do most of the time with issues relating to boundaries, classification, and order: what is thought of as impure is often what is left out, the rubbish that cannot fall neatly into place within proper categories, and therefore threatens the existence of order itself.²⁵ Ultimately, it can be synonymous with anything that is ambiguous, confusing, boundaries-crossing, and consequently something which elicits a reaction of aversion and disgust, precisely because of its alleged contaminating powers.²⁶

If the strong concern for purity in Separatist writings was nothing new, and if the purity of the church had long served to justify compulsion and persecution, it is difficult to see how it came to justify just the opposite, unless we acknowledge the Separatist transformation was not so much in the conception of purity, but in a radical redrawing of boundaries.

Redefining boundaries, deterritorialising the Church

One key aspect is the redefinition of what counts as public or communal space. During the Reformation era, what triggered religious mob violence most of the time was the perception of a contamination of the communal space by “the Other”: churches, main streets, highways and in many cases the city walls. *Modus vivendi* could be achieved, as the historian Benjamin Kaplan (among others) has shown in *Divided by faith*, by paying attention and respect to the boundaries of what was considered as the “public space”. The community was essentially symbolized and materialized in space, and

²⁵ See M. Douglas, *De la souillure, Essais sur les notions de pollution et de tabou* [1967], trad. A. Guérin, Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 2001.

²⁶ Mary Douglas humorously claims that if the ancient Hebrews had known of the penguin, this neither-fish-nor-fowl species would definitely have been deemed impure by the authors of the *Leviticus*...

the concern for purity had a spatial basis: unstable but welcome compromises could be achieved if, and only if, the boundaries of what counted as “the public square” were taken into account, as they were in the case of the Germanic *Auslauf* for example.²⁷

That is precisely what the Separatist logic destroyed, for two reasons: the relevant boundary now cut in the flesh right through local communities, between the elect and the damned; second, the church was not enclosed in space, it was built out of living stones, the faithful, and not to be identified with any particular place. Robert Browne makes this clear when he writes “*For the place make not the church, neither is the church or true religion, to be measured by the place [...] neither temples, nor cities, nor parishes*”²⁸. We might assume that the experience of exile was the key to understand this disconnection between community and space, this loss of the topographical inscription of religion. As a matter of fact, and out of necessity (they were persecuted), the Separatists became highly mobile, but causality could be reversed: they were able to embrace exile in the first place because their conception of the Church and their reading of the Holy Scriptures supported this move. No one puts it better than John Robinson himself: “*If no place upon the face of the earth should be free for us (poore creatures) refusing upon meere conscience of God [...] to commingle, and prostitute our selves in and unto this confusion [...] we have most assured hope, that heaven itself is open for us by Christ.*”²⁹ Old Testament

²⁷ B. J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith, Religious conflict and the practice of toleration in early modern Europe*, Cambridge (MA), The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. For the *Auslauf*, see p. 161 *sq.* For interesting developments on the public/private dichotomy at a time when confessional identities defined political communities, see p. 176-177.

²⁸ “*For the place maketh not the church, neither is the church or true religion to be measured by the place [...] [The one true church consists of] not the places, neither temples, nor cities, no parishes.*” (R. Browne, *Answer to Cartwright, op. cit.*, p. 19)

²⁹ J. Robinson, *Apology, op. cit.*, p. 65.

precedents notwithstanding, this means that any attempt at territorialising the sacred is doomed to failure. John Robinson sums it up neatly with his striking claim that there is now “no such thing as a holy *land*”.³⁰

Separatists defined a church – in line with what they perceived was the blueprint for all true churches, the primitive Church – as a congregation of the faithful, a “*gathering*” of the elect (hence “gathered churches”), “*an assembly of persons called out of corrupt nature by supernaturall grace*”³¹. Membership in what Robinson called “*the suburbs of heaven*”³² could not be automatic – and it must be remembered that some congregations (some of them Separatists, some not) later developed a test of faith, which included a spiritual autobiography, a testimony of the calling and conversion of the candidate to be delivered in front the entire church before he or she could be safely admitted to communion – and it is entirely understandable that this logic could lead at least some of them towards a kind of “*believers baptism*” à la John Smyth. Hypocrites could still pass through (especially “self-deceivers”, a specifically Calvinist nightmare, who could be tricky to detect), but at least the church would have made its utmost to keep out, as Henry Barrow claims in *A True Description of the Visible Church* (quoting the Bible): “*dogges and enchaunters, and whoremongers and murderers [and idolatours] and who so ever loveth and maketh lyes.*”; “*Into this temple [he adds] entreth no*

³⁰ “*If the order in Israel bee objected; it may bee answered, first, that the Land was holy, as no Land now is.*” (J. Robinson, *Essayes divine and morall*, op. cit., p. 89).

³¹ “*An assembly of persons called out of the state of corrupt nature into that of supernaturall grace.*” (*Ibid.*, p. 30)

³² “*Are others to be admitted into the familie of God, the Kingdom of Christ, and as it were the suburbs of heaven?*” (*Ibid.*, p. 61)

*uncleane thing, [...] but they which are written in the Lambes Booke of Life.”*³³

Seceding from the ungodly is then the preliminary move to any attempt at church-building. Barrow told his interrogator that his church was “*separate and gathered from the prophane of the land*”, and *therefore* (emphasis needed) a true Church³⁴; Robert Browne concurred: the power and privilege of the church is to “*separate the ungodlie*” by using a stronger means than the soft medicine of excommunication with penance³⁵. And, as George Gifford remarked, they had a rather broad construction of the words “prophane” and “ungodly”³⁶. For example, since nothing unclean can contribute to the edification of the church, Browne argued that tithes cannot be mandatory, but only made of willing contributions from the Elect, because the traditional method would lead, for example, to Church papists contributing to the living of the ministers of the True religion. Such money would of course be hopelessly stained and therefore not acceptable in the eyes of God, nor in Henry Barrow’s eyes – and Barrow quoted *Leviticus* extensively to that effect³⁷.

When ministers of the Church of England claimed that they already had the power to excommunicate the unworthy, Separatists replied that plain excommunication was definitely not enough, because it meant that most offenders were still part of the Church, and they shouldn’t have been let in in the first place. If these misguided divines invoked the parable of the

³³ H. Barrow, *A True Description out of the Word of God, of the Visible Church*, s.l., 1589, p. 8 and p. 9.

³⁴ H. Barrow dans Anon., *A Collection of certain Letters and Conferences*, *op. cit.*, p. 2-3.

³⁵ See R. Browne, *A Treatise of reformation*, *op. cit.*, p. 17; see also *Answer to Cartwright*, *op. cit.*, p. 30, where this power to cast out is extended to whole nations and kingdoms.

³⁶ See for example G. Gifford, *Donatists of England*, *op. cit.*, p. 49 *sq.*

³⁷ H. Barrow, dans Anon., *A Collection of Letters and Conferences*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

wheat and the tares, as they often did, Separatists replied that this scripture should not be properly applied to the Church, but to the World. Robinson, in his *Apology of the people called Brownists*, suggests that “*if by the world, you understand the church*” then you are deeply confused indeed³⁸. The early church was to them a highly selective club of believers: “*as appeareth in the Acts of the Apostles, was neither the church nor the covenants established among any, but where their good and godly profession was shewed, and the contrary refused.*”³⁹ Such exclusiveness would certainly appear to be the dark side of separatism, but here comes the bright side: because separation had to come first, Churches could be built from the bottom up and not top-down, which in turn implied that ministers had to seek the consent of the congregation: they were in a sense the representative of the people and therefore accountable to them.

No power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, could be thrust on the congregation in religious matters, and that went a long way to deny the use of coercion and compulsion in religious matters. Separatists thus broke decisively with traditional (medieval) conceptions of the church. Compulsory attendance forces unregenerate masses into the church of God and it brings two evils with it according to them: it fosters hypocrisy and nominal Christianity instead of true conversion, and it turns the church into a poisonous confusion of the elect and the damned. In a parish-based church (as Robinson wrote), “*all natives there and subjects of the kingdom, although never such strangers from all shewe of true piety and goodness [...] are without difference compelled and inforced by the most severe laws civil and ecclesiasticall into the bodie of that church.*” A church built

³⁸ “*Christ himself interprets the feild [sic], not the Church, but the world. [...] If by the world, you understand the Church [...]*” (J. Robinson, *Apology*, *op. cit.*, p. 69)

³⁹ R. Browne, *Answer to Cartwright*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

“according to the place of habitation” is in the end no church at all, precisely *because* no “difference” is made. The logical outcome that is entailed for Robinson and many others within the Separatist tradition is crystal clear: membership in Church and membership in the State (as citizen or subject, or both) must be disconnected. *“So neither doe Idolatrie, or Heresie (how great sinnes soever in themselves) so outlaw a Subject civilly, as doe Seditions, Murthers, Adulteries and the like directly violating, and disturbing civil societies.”*⁴⁰ Robinson goes on: *“The bond betweene Magistrate, and Subject is essentially civil: but Religious accidentally onely.”*⁴¹ It is a fact that this idea was a more promising foundation to justify a form of toleration than any version of Luther’s *Zwei Reiche*. It applied to the godly and the ungodly alike, not because the Separatists had any concern for the salvation of the latter, but precisely because they had none whatsoever. Browne is perfectly explicit about this: *“For wee shall not give accounptes unto God for them which are out of our charge.”*⁴² Separatists came to reject compulsion almost exclusively because of its effects on the purity of the church.

Insisting that church membership should be voluntary could be based on respect for the autonomy of individuals; and a comparison between the federal theology of the covenant so common among Separatists and the modern notion of contract could help (on a superficial reading) to support such a view. Robinson does indeed compare the gathering of a church and the charter of a corporation. And the rhetoric of conscience is indeed pervasive in their writings. But two reasons demonstrate that it cannot be an early occurrence of liberal respect for individual rights in religious

⁴⁰ J. Robinson, *Essays*, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴² R. Browne, *A Treatise of reformation*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

matters: first of all, for the Separatists we are here dealing with, the will is not free. We have to keep in mind that except for general Baptists, they generally shared a strong belief in double-predestination, of the more stringent Calvinistic type. The “will” which leads them to church is another name for God’s grace, and they can claim no special desert in this respect Separatists repeatedly made this very answer to reformed theologians accusing them of reverting to a “Covenant of works” because they had made church attendance a “voluntary” business. Their emphasis on conscience too, like that of Luther, can be easily mistaken for an individual’s right to his or her own opinion, which it is not (their conscience is, as was his, captive to the Word of God).

The second reason why they could be no pioneers of modern individualism or post-modern subjectivism is the following: the Elect called by God were under the strongest possible obligation of joining a Church, and a pure one at that. The Separatists made this point again and again: one man is no church, true religion is not to be lived outside of a community of the faithful.⁴³ In a *Briefe Catechism*, Robinson wrote what was obvious to all: “[every believer] must also by his personall and publick profession adjoyne himself to some particular fellowship and societie of Saints.”⁴⁴ When he asked “*Is it therefore lawfull for a Christian to content himself with himself, without joyning to any Christian congregation?*”, that was, of course, a rhetorical question. “Believing” to them can never be severed from “belonging”, to allude to Grace Davie’s depiction of religion in contemporary Britain.⁴⁵ Individual salvation remains strongly tied to the

⁴³ “One man cannot be a Church, which as Christ teacheth, must be a company, how small soever, gathered together in his name.” (J. Robinson, *A Briefe Catechisme concerning Church Government*, London, 1642, p. 13)

⁴⁴ J. Robinson, *A Briefe Catechisme*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴⁵ See G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945, Believing without Belonging*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

collective journey of the church through the “holy fellowship”. No “believing without belonging” would be conceivable in the mental world: concern for the purity of the church, not respect for the rights of conscience, is what led some of them down the path that led to toleration.

Conclusion: Puritanism, Separatism, and the Salvation Raft

The reason why the Separatist tradition ended up defending toleration, contrary to the bulk of their Puritan (especially Presbyterian) cousins, and in some cases a robust and radical version of it, was not Christian brotherly love, and it was emphatically not a liberal respect for the autonomy of the subject nor value-pluralism nor any kind of sceptical posture worried about the “burdens of judgment” (as the philosopher John Rawls put it): it was bluntly that their conception of the Church as a pure gathering of the Elect implied to let the multitude of the damned should go to hell their own way.⁴⁶ Above all, it meant that they should never let this wretched refuse (be they lawful kings or queens) meddle with Christ’s beloved Saints gathered on their salvation raft. And yet, once again, at the end of the day, some of them came to support toleration, just like Tertullian did (somehow) in Christian antiquity – they were fond of quoting him rather than Augustine in that respect – and no one who has ever read Tertullian could claim that he was the most charitable or tolerant of the early Christian luminaries.⁴⁷ There was much in their dream of a spiritual

⁴⁶ Martha Nussbaum, in her rather hagiographic description of Roger Williams, seems to be oblivious to the kind of intolerance that he inherited in part from his Separatist ancestors (see M. Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, *op. cit.*, esp. p. 34 *sq.*).

⁴⁷ For an overview of toleration debates (if we might call them so) in Christian Antiquity, and one that shows how the Separatist point of view could be linked to the views of Tertullian, see P. Garnsey, “Religious toleration in classical antiquity”, in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration*, London, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 1-27.

Apartheid which could be shared with mainstream Puritans, especially concerning the difficulty (and disgust) of living side by side with the unreformed, but a majority of Puritans stopped short of taking the radical shortcut of Separatism. If persecution could be sometimes described as a form of “charitable hatred”, then the Separatists’ vision of toleration could well be described as a kind of “hateful charity”.

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