

## CROMWELL STUDY DAY: OCTOBER 2015 CROMWELL'S RELIGION

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### WAS CROMWELL AN INDEPENDENT OR CONGREGATIONALIST?

*By Dr Joel Halcomb*

Colin Davis's groundbreaking 1990 article on 'Cromwell's religion' was, like so much of his work, brilliantly historiographic. Historians from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were confident that Cromwell was a puritan, an Independent, the leader and defender of the civil war sects. And it was confidence, Davis explained, that helps us understand why Cromwell's religious beliefs remained comparatively understudied up until the 1980s. There were, of course, warning signs that things might be more complicated. The great Samuel Gardiner was able to describe Cromwell as 'the foremost Independent of the day', and then within a few pages of that assertion point out that 'in the sectarian sense indeed, Cromwell never attached himself to the Independent or any other religious body'.<sup>1</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century, historians shifted from the first of Gardiner's assertions towards the second. Thus, for Christopher Hill, 'Cromwell [could] be identified with no sect'.<sup>2</sup> This shift was made possible by the emergence of a more nuanced and complex picture of revolutionary religion. By 1990, 'puritanism' had become contested as a useful term.<sup>3</sup> 'Independency' was deemed confusing and problematic.<sup>4</sup> And leading historians like Hill forcefully argued that religious denominations were a later development; religious affiliation was fluid during the revolution.<sup>5</sup> Davis appropriated these historiographic developments and 'reclaimed Cromwell from the denominational straightjacket into which well-meaning Victorians had placed him'.<sup>6</sup>

Part of the reason Davis's chapter proved so powerful was the way in which he connected the brutal realities of the surviving evidence of Cromwell's faith and practices with this new picture of revolutionary religion:

Cromwell left no programmatic statements, no credos on which we can base a description of his faith and its personal or social meaning. There are...no confessional records. ... Cromwell left no journal, no diary revealing the nature of his spiritual self-examination. No records of his reading nor of the contents of his library.<sup>7</sup>

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We are simply incapable of answering basic questions about how he worshipped. But for Davis, this is not an anomaly. Cromwell was an anti-formalist. Just as political constitutions were 'dross and dung' in comparison to Christ, just as he was not 'wedded and glued to forms of government', so too he sought to transcend earthly churches and religious forms for a higher, more pure spirituality and submission to God's revealed providence.<sup>8</sup> Others were quick to pick up Davis's thesis. John Morrill later recalled the chapter having a 'stunning' impact when it appeared.<sup>9</sup> David Smith republished Davis's chapter in an important edited collection on Cromwell.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, Davis's arguments found wholesale acceptance by Morrill, who has stressed in his work Cromwell's 'antiformalism, his liturgical informality, his unsystematic soteriology, his lack of doctrinal coherence'.<sup>11</sup>

Accurate though this picture may be, it remains inherently muddy. It reduces his religious beliefs down to a core, fundamental Trinitarianism and a powerful and dynamic providentialism.<sup>12</sup> Yet Cromwell was a puritan, a preacher, a pastor (or at least pastoral in his letters), and a leader of the Church (as Protector). This is hardly the normal résumé of someone ill-defined in their beliefs. This article is a small attempt to further contextualize some of Cromwell's beliefs. By returning again to the question of whether or not Cromwell was an Independent we can, I hope, explore how we might better understand his ecclesiastical position. We can also offer up a potential, less spiritual, explanation for his apparent ecclesiastical anti-formalism.

I

We should start with the last historian to argue forthrightly that Cromwell was an Independent: Robert Paul. In his 1955 biography, *The Lord Protector*, Paul had already grasped some of the problems that Davis and others would later flag up. Paul admitted we have no clear evidence that Cromwell was ever a member of any Independent church, and he recognized the importance of Cromwell's participation in the Church of England before the civil wars. Nonetheless, Paul went on to claim that Cromwell's identity as an Independent could be drawn from his army experience (where, he claims, his troops formed a gathered church), from his associations, and by his ideas of toleration. According to Paul, Independency was the only

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ecclesiastical option of the period that 'could embrace in equality all shades of Puritan opinion'.<sup>13</sup> Working from Paul's arguments, this article will re-examine the evidence for Cromwell's church membership and then attempt to contextualize his statements on the church and church polity. As a note on terms, Independency is used here interchangeably with congregationalism. Congregationalism was a democratic gathered church movement, similar to baptists and separatists, where membership was restricted to 'visible saints', those who were deemed likely to be of God's elect.

To what extent then was Cromwell's formative religious experience and strongest religious connections with the gathered churches? Cromwell's pre-civil war puritanism is iconic, but while the evidence we have of his pre-civil war faith is suggestive of a preference for gathered church style religion, it remains inconclusive. His 1638 letter to Mrs St John is a classic example of a puritan conversion narrative (or, more accurately, a relation of religious 'experiences'): 'Oh, I lived in and loved darkness, and hated the light; I was a chief, the chief of sinners. This is true', but now 'my soul is with the congregation of the firstborn, my body rests in hope, and if here I may honour my God either by doing or by suffering, I shall be most glad'.<sup>14</sup> This is one of the single most important sources we have for Cromwell's personal beliefs and it has been used to explain his self-confidence, his dynamism, and his great rise to power. However, it is worth pointing out that this, the earliest description we have by Cromwell of his own faith, expresses his salvation, his sainthood, within the context of a congregation of saints: 'my soul is with the congregation of the firstborn'. This is paraphrasing the Geneva version of Hebrews 12:23. In a letter full of quotations taken from both the Geneva and King James bibles, it is instructive that 'congregation of the first borne' resonated more with Cromwell than the King James version of this text: 'the general assembly and church of the firstborn'.<sup>15</sup> The Geneva translation is more democratic and local in its tone, the King James translation is more institutional and ecclesiastical. Cromwell, instinctively or not, preferred the former.

Turning to Cromwell's actions, John Morrill has pressed the real possibility that Cromwell was planning to emigrate to the 'howling wilderness' (as Cromwell later called it) of New England in the 1630s, where congregationalism was establishing itself as a permanent fixture of Anglo-

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American protestantism. When Cromwell sold up his properties in Huntingdon in 1631 he moved to St Ives where he became a tenant of Henry Lawrence, who had just become a patentee of the Saybrook venture that established the Connecticut colony. We know that by 1635 Lawrence was planning to move imminently and it is very possible that Cromwell was part of a group of godly émigrés that Lawrence was organizing for that colony.<sup>16</sup> As intriguing and suggestive as this possibility is, there is very little evidence that lay puritan exiles in either Holland or New England arrived with firm views on congregationalism. Most, it seems, encountered congregational practices for the first time upon arrival.<sup>17</sup>

Further compelling but inconclusive evidence comes from Andrew Barclay's recent re-examination of evidence pertaining to Cromwell's early life. Barclay uncovered a handful of different sources which claimed that on the eve of the civil war Cromwell participated in puritan 'conventicles', entertained preachers at his house, and even preached himself. All of these stories were given long after the fact, and from hearsay, but Barclay has shown that enough details can be verified to suggest some kernel of truth behind them.<sup>18</sup> What might we make of this evidence? Paul, aware of some of this evidence, was too quick to conflate pre- civil war conventicles with separatism or a gathered church.<sup>19</sup> 'Conventicle' was often used as a hostile description of extra-parochial puritan 'conferencing'. These meetings brought together local godly men and women for religious fellowship, including discussing sermons, prayer, sharing religious experiences, and occasionally preaching.<sup>20</sup> On the eve of the civil wars, conventicles and godly conferences were common throughout the country; gathered churches, on the other hand, were rare.

None of the pre- civil war evidence, therefore, can be used to confidently claim that Cromwell was a congregationalist or separatist before the civil wars. But, we can at least argue that Cromwell was a convinced puritan, that he placed a high value on lay spirituality, and that he probably supported more lay involvement in the church. He was hardly a separatist. He promoted godly lectureships within the Church and he baptized his children within the Church. He is, therefore, probably best described as a puritan nonconformist prior to the English civil wars.

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During the civil wars Cromwell's life as a soldier was more nomadic and this was bound to have had an impact on the types of engagement he could have with a church. Nonetheless, it is here that we find the most direct evidence for Cromwell being involved in a gathered church. Richard Baxter, the famous pastor from Kidderminster, claimed in his extensive memoirs that Cromwell's troops gathered themselves into a church. At some point at the start of the war – Baxter is not clear – he was invited to be a pastor over Cromwell's troops. Baxter's account of this invitation appears within the context of his first visit to the New Model Army in Leicester after the battle of Naseby. At Leicester, he found the army in a shocking state. While many of the soldiers and officers were 'honest, sober, Orthodox Men, and others tractable ready to hear the Truth, and of upright Intentions', 'a few proud, self-conceited, hot-headed Sectaries had got into the highest places, and were Cromwell's chief Favourites, and by their very heat and activity bore down the rest, or carried them along with them, and were the Soul of the Army'.<sup>21</sup> Baxter blames himself for this situation:

And I reprehended my self also, who had before rejected an Invitation from Cromwell: 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, reproving their Attempt, and told them wherein my Judgment was against the Lawfulness and Convenience of their way, and so I heard no more from them: And afterward meeting Cromwell at Leicester he expostulated with me for denying them. These very men that then invited me to be their Pastor, were the Men that afterwards headed much of the Army, and some of them were the forwardest in all our Changes; which made me wish that I had gone among them.<sup>22</sup>

This is, as far as I am aware, the only known reference for Cromwell's troops (or any troops) organizing themselves into a gathered church. For Robert Paul, this passage was crucial: 'It is reliable evidence that he [Cromwell] not only embraced the Independents' ecclesiastical position early in the Civil War, but also set about the curious task of forming his troop of horse into an Independent Church – a kind of militant congregation'.<sup>23</sup> Paul even cites the index of Baxter's *Reliquiae* for confirmation of the point: 'he

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[Cromwell] invites Mr Baxter to be Chaplain and Pastour to his Regiment when he was forming it into a Church'.<sup>24</sup> Although this is clearly a very important passage, there are some problems with Paul's particular conclusions.

First and most obviously, the index entry and Paul's interpretation do not agree with Baxter's account. The phrasing in the index is not Baxter's, it is that of Matthew Sylvester, the editor who published Baxter's memoirs after his death.<sup>25</sup> Baxter's own words are clear: '*his Officers* purposed to make their Troops a gathered Church' (my emphasis). The impetus to gather a church was coming from the officers, not from Cromwell, according to Baxter. This is an important distinction, which both Paul and Sylvester overlooked. Baxter, as we shall see below, was writing precisely. Secondly, to what extent can we trust Baxter's account? Most of the surrounding contextual information in Baxter's account is accurate.<sup>26</sup> But Cromwell is the villain in Baxter's *Reliquiae*. He is repeatedly described by Baxter as the leader of the sectarian party. Perhaps it is too much to accuse Baxter of blatantly fabricating a first-hand account, but he does have a tendency to misinterpret, misunderstand, and to bend the truth – this is exactly the sort of story we might expect to emerge from Baxter's narrative bias.

Is there any corroborating evidence? This is the only known explicit reference to troops gathering a church in the army. This should make us suspicious. Nonetheless, similarly ambiguous evidence exists from around the time of Baxter's story. In October 1643, for instance, the presbyterian Colonel Edward King in Boston 'imprisoned divers of his [own] officers, and diverse of the townspeople, and some of Lieut. Gen. Cromwell's troopers for assembling together at a private meeting'.<sup>27</sup> John Lilburne described these as private meetings; Thomas Edwards, the presbyterian heresiographer, described them as 'an unlawful conventicle at an unseasonable time in the night'.<sup>28</sup> Neither account describes these meetings as a church gathering. A congregational church had been gathered in the town at some point before August 1645, when they wrote to the congregational church in Great Yarmouth, but it is unclear when this church first formed.<sup>29</sup> Many within the Eastern Association army may have been aware of church gatherings taking place in 1641–1643.<sup>30</sup> The congregational minister William Bridge travelled with Colonel Miles Hobart's troops in the summer of 1643.<sup>31</sup> Bridge had been pastor to the exiled congregational

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church in Rotterdam, which had close ties with the congregational church in Arnhem, where Henry Lawrence was a member after he left St Ives.<sup>32</sup> Between November 1642 and June 1643, Bridge was involved in gathering a church of returned exiles in Norwich and Great Yarmouth. One of the Norwich congregationalists enlisted in Captain Thomas Ashwell's company in October 1642.<sup>33</sup> All this information lends plausibility to the notion that some within the Eastern Association army were aware of church gatherings, but Baxter's story still stands alone in claiming troops gathered their own churches.

Paul also implies that Cromwell's recruitment policies were in line with gathered church membership policies.<sup>34</sup> Most of his evidence will be familiar to any student of Cromwell. In August 1643, Cromwell instructed members of the Suffolk committee 'If you choose godly honest men to be captains of Horse, honest men will follow them'.<sup>35</sup> Later, in 1657 he recounted a conversation with John Hampden, probably dating from after the battle of Edgehill: 'your Troops said I, are most of them old decayed Servingmen and Tapsters, and such kind of Fellows; and said I, their Troops are Gentlemens Sons, younger Sons, and persons of qualitie ... truly I did tell him, you must get men of a spirit... of a spirit that is likely to go on as far as a Gentlemen will go'. For Cromwell these were 'such men as had the fear of God before them, and made some Conscience of what they did, and from that day forward I must say to you, they were never beaten'.<sup>36</sup> Cromwell clearly preferred godly officers, but godliness was not the exclusive criteria, nor was this policy exclusively Cromwell's, as Clive Holmes has shown. It was part of the wider recruiting activities of the Eastern Association under the earl of Manchester. Their vision of godly officers was ecumenical. It comprehended, as Manchester explained, all who 'love Christ in sincerity' though 'differing in judgement to what I profess'.<sup>37</sup> But they also sought men who could and would serve the cause. Experienced soldiers were sought, but not at the expense of immoral behaviour. Dedication to the cause was valued above specific religious beliefs. Cromwell told Major-General Crawford, 'Sir, the State, in choosing men to serve them, takes no notice of their opinions, if they be willing faithfully to serve them, that satisfies'.<sup>38</sup> Experience, dedication, and godliness were the core, for the ultimate purpose was to create an effective army.<sup>39</sup> The emphasis on military ability and political dedication moved a significant step away from the test for visible sainthood found in most gathered churches. These recruitment

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policies were explicitly pan-denominational: presbyterians, independents, and baptists can all be found within the Association's ranks. And, crucially, as mentioned above, we have no evidence other than from Baxter that the army organized itself into any ecclesiastical form.

The army's reputation for Independency was polemical. Manchester's reputation for employing godly officers and enforcing strict discipline hit the London press in the autumn of 1643. Early on this was presented positively: 'The best meanes to have a growing...Army, is to appoint...Commanders of godly and religious lives, ... and such more eminently are the...Officers under this Noble Earle'.<sup>40</sup> But this reputation quickly became a liability. When Cromwell mentioned his 'lovely cumpanie' to Oliver St John in September 1643, he was defending them from accusations of Anabaptism.<sup>41</sup> By September 1644 Cromwell was complaining to Valentine Walton:

[we] desier to referr the many slaunders heaped upon us by false tongues, to God, whoe will in due tyme make itt apeare to the world, that wee studye the Glory of God, the honor, and libertye of the Parliament, for which wee unanimously fight ... wee are sayd to bee factious, to seeke to maintaine our opinions \in Religion/ by force, which we detest, and abhorr, I professe I could never Satisfie my selfe of the justnesse of this warr but from the Authoritye of the Parliament to maintaine itt.<sup>42</sup>

Here we see the stress on honest godliness, broadly defined as studying the glory of God, and fighting for the liberty and authority of parliament, but these traits are mobilized against growing accusations that the army was Independent or sectarian.

Such accusations only increased. Sir John Hotham described Cromwell's troops as being 'a company of Brownists, Anabaptists, Factious, inferiour persons'.<sup>43</sup> Robert Baillie, a Scottish Presbyterian, wrote that 'all sectaries who pleased to be soujors, for a long time casting themselves from all other [armies], arrive under [Manchester's] command'.<sup>44</sup> In the dispute with Crawford and Manchester after Marston Moor, deponents mocked Cromwell's defence of his officers as 'godly' men, 'having the name of a godly man', and 'the title of godly pretious men'; ... 'If you looke upon his



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owne regiment of horse see what a swarme ther is of thos that call themselves the godly; some of them profess they have sene vissions and had reuellations'; the regiments of Russell, Montigue, Pickering, Rainsborough – 'all of them professed Independents'.<sup>45</sup> Accusations of religious radicalism invariably came from Cromwell's opponents.

Baxter also believed these accusations. Baxter was quick to draw a correlation between the success of the army and its godly soldiers, for he ultimately saw religious extremism within the army as the downfall of the nation. Writing of his encounter in Leicester after Naseby, he declared: 'They most honoured the Separatists, Anabaptists, and Antinomians; but Cromwell and his Council took on them to joyn themselves to no Party, but to be for the Liberty of all'.<sup>46</sup> This quote brings us back to Baxter's story of Cromwell's troops gathering a church. Both quotations appear on the same page of Baxter's *Reliquiae*. Baxter claimed that Cromwell and the council refrained from joining themselves to any party, then blamed Cromwell's officers for gathering their troops into a church. While his comments about gathering a church remain striking in context, this policy of withholding affiliation fits well with what we know of army recruitment. Surely non-affiliation was essential for leading a wide diversity of men, and the resultant culture helps explain Cromwell's emphasis on liberty of conscience throughout his career.

We see the result of these policies most clearly, perhaps, in Cromwell's famous letters to parliament after Naseby and the fall of Bristol. 'Honest men served you faythfully in this action', he wrote to speaker Lenthall in June 1645, 'Sir they are trustye, I beseech you in the name of God not to discourage them ... Hee that venters his life for the libertye of his cuntrie, I wish Hee trust God for the libertye of his conscience, and you for the libertye Hee fights for'.<sup>47</sup> And after Bristol, 'Presbiterians Independentes all had here the same spiritt of faith & prayer, the same pretence & answer, they agree here, know no names of difference'.<sup>48</sup> Contemporaries did know the difference, of course, but differences could be overlooked when fighting against a common enemy. Cromwell consistently and passionately insisted on liberty for tender consciences, but this should not distract us from the pragmatic value or necessity of this position.

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Compelling evidence, therefore, consistently aligns Cromwell closer with Independent, congregational, or at least democratic forms of puritan nonconformity. But the evidence for Cromwell being a member of a gathered church is ultimately never forthcoming. And, throughout the civil wars he probably came to see the value, even necessity, of not publicly aligning himself with one church movement. If the evidence (or Cromwell) refuses to confirm his 'Independency', to what extent did he express himself in line with congregational or independent ideas?

We can begin with Cromwell's ideas about sainthood, for it was the foundation of his vision for liberty of conscience and the most fundamental principle behind congregational ecclesiology. Writing to Lord Wharton on 2 September 1648 Cromwell exclaimed, 'When we think of our God, what are we. Oh, His mercy to the whole society of saints, despised, jeered saints! Let them mock on. Would we were all saints. The best of us are (God knows) poor weak saints, yet saints; if not sheep, yet lambs, and must be fed'.<sup>49</sup> Cromwell valued saints, honest godly men, poor Christians more than other humans. He spoke of saints as a 'whole society', as set apart from, and in conflict with – they were 'despised, jeered' – the rest of the world. This tendency is, and should surely be understood as, essentially puritan, but Cromwell's language resonates very strongly with congregational writings on church membership. For example, in the *Apologeticall Narration*, the most famous publication by the congregational 'dissenting brethren' in the Westminster Assembly, congregational members were described as 'such as all the Churches in the world would ... acknowledge faithfull' and faithfulness was judged by 'that latitude as would take in any member of Christ, the meanest, in whom there may be supposed to be the least of Christ'.<sup>50</sup> Cromwell could also express sainthood in a fundamentally Reformed, or Calvinist, formula. Speaking before parliament on 17 September 1656 Cromwell claimed that it was faith in Jesus Christ and 'walking in a profession answerable to that faith' that made you one of the people of God.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, most congregationalists argued that visible sainthood, and therefore entrance into the church, could only be measured by an orthodox profession of faith, evidence of repentance from known sins, and continuing godly behaviour. Cromwell's vision of the 'people of God' merely restated this basic Reformed theological position. Perhaps

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most importantly, by the early mid-1650s this expression of church membership had become a cornerstone of arguments promoting accommodation and unity between presbyterians and congregationalists.<sup>52</sup>

Cromwell's statements on the church and the godly were also clearly rooted in the universal invisible church, as Davis has pointed out,<sup>53</sup> and they were often set as an ideal against the bitter realities of Britain and Ireland's divisive visible church denominations. This tendency can be found in Cromwell's writings and speeches throughout the interregnum. His impulse was always aimed at unity and purity. In his speech before the Nominated Assembly in July 1653, a speech that John Morrill thinks is one of Cromwell's most authentic and honest statements, Cromwell instructs the assembly to 'be faithfull with the saints', 'be pittifull & tender towards all, all, though of different Judgements ... I beseech yow (but I thinke I need not) have a care of the whole flocke; Love the Sheep, Love the Lambs, love all, Tender all, cherish and countenance all'. And in another section, 'I mean when I say the people of God, I meane the large Comprehencion of them under the severall Formes of Godlines in this Nacion'.<sup>54</sup>

Such quotations could be multiplied ad nauseam. For Cromwell, the godly were spread throughout the several forms of the civil war puritan church movements. 'Be they those under Baptism, be they those of the Independent judgment simply, and of the Presbyterian judgment', he instructed parliament in 1656, 'in the name of God, encourage them, countenance them'.<sup>55</sup> And again, 'whoever hath this Faith [in Christ], let his Form be what it will; he walking peaceably, without the prejudicing of others under another Form'.<sup>56</sup> In these statements, Cromwell consistently values the universal invisible church of Christians, that is the heavenly unity of all saints through the spirit, above any particular visible church on earth. He was not against these visible churches, these 'forms'; rather he focused on a higher, more spiritual form, one more attached to the universal invisible church. In that sense he was not 'anti-formal', if by that we mean against ecclesiastical forms: 'Who ever hath this Faith, let his forme be what it will'. Ultimately, such forms, or visible churches, were united through the spirit. The congregational position could be considered similar to this. For congregationalists, there was no universal visible church on earth. There were only particular visible churches, who were united to Christ through the spirit. These particular visible churches might even be reformed parish

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churches, presbyterian congregations, or even some tolerant baptist churches.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, what can we say about Cromwell's expression of religious toleration?<sup>58</sup> Cromwell's ideas of liberty of conscience developed through his army experience, yet they were also expressed through Reformed pneumatology, that is in the Spirit's guidance of Christians towards truth, though godly fellowship and spiritual growth. Honest, poor weak Christians strove towards truth and understanding, but never fully reached it in their earthly life. 'We are very apt, all of us,' he claimed at Putney, 'to call that faith, that perhaps may be but carnal imagination, and carnal reasoning'.<sup>59</sup> But 'God is not the author of contradictions. The contradictions are not so much in the end as in the way'.<sup>60</sup> Divisions and contradictions were overcome through humility, and being 'pittifull & tender towards all ... though of different Judgements'.<sup>61</sup> The Spirit must be given time to work on the hearts of men. Pity was earned through peaceable living and charity towards other saints. Writing after the fall of Bristol, Cromwell stressed that, 'As for being united in formes (commonly called uniformity) every Christian will for Peace sake, study and doe as far as Conscience will permit'.<sup>62</sup> Peaceable charity towards others was a hallmark of Cromwell's statements on liberty of conscience, and he reacted angrily to those who disrupted the peace.<sup>63</sup> When dissolving his first Protectoral parliament, Cromwell singled out 'Prophane Persons, Blasphemers, such as preach Sedition, the Contentious Railers, Evil Speakers' for punishment by the civil magistrate: 'because, if these pretend Conscience, yet walking disorderly, and not according, but contrary to the Gospel, and even to natural light, they are judged of all, and their Sins being open, makes them subjects of the Magistrates Sword, who ought not to bear it in vain'.<sup>64</sup>

As John Coffey has shown, Cromwell's understanding of toleration and the role of the civil magistrate align most comfortably with moderate congregationalists like the dissenting brethren.<sup>65</sup> Much of his language, however, finds its greatest resonance with congregational pleas for unity during the 1650s. The language and theology of unity between presbyterians and congregationalists has been mentioned above, but we can also consider debates over communion and fellowship between congregationalists and baptists. When dealing with errant members, one Welsh church was advised to 'Let love be the load-stoan to draw saints rather than the law to drive

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them', for believers were not under the law, but grace, and 'by blessed experience' they should know 'that till the Lord perswades a heart none can'.<sup>66</sup> Congregational communion was based on visible sainthood, and in battles with rigid baptists, liberty of conscience became an ecclesiastical policy of congregationalists. A church in Netherton, Gloucestershire, advised walking 'with all tendernes even as the Lord Christ did towards us before our soules were perswaded and as we would have had others caried themselves towards us'.<sup>67</sup> Henry Jessey, one of Cromwell's 'triers', worked tirelessly throughout the 1650s to preserve unity among the nation's gathered churches. In a sermon published after his death by John Bunyan, one arguing against 'rigid' baptists who refused communion to congregationalists, Jessey developed his toleration from Romans 14:1: 'Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye'. Jessey argued that God put no limitation on receiving saints weak in faith, whether within or without of the church. Tolerating tender consciences was not simply charitable, it was a command from God to his church.<sup>68</sup> For Cromwell, it was his command to the nation at large.

III

Contextualizing Cromwell's statements on sainthood, the church, and liberty of conscience is unlikely to produce any firm conclusions about his denominational preferences. Puritans of all forms could find areas of agreement on these issues. His tireless quest for godly unity encouraged him to choose language that resonated with all the godly. At no point can we easily pin him down as an 'Independent' or congregationalist. Nor can we show that he was a member of any gathered church. But there are good reasons to think that Cromwell resisted any formal denominational association. Davis has rightly pointed us towards Cromwell's anti-formalism and desire for godly unity. We should also add politics to our analysis, for Cromwell was the greatest politician of the revolution. Liberty of conscience and godly unity were political necessities from his earliest days in the army to his time as Lord Protector. They developed from the realities of puritan divisions and the necessities of war. Cromwell's ability to appear to be all things to all men was equally studied and no doubt sprang from the same imperatives.

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So, was Cromwell an Independent? He was far too much the politician to admit that to contemporaries or to us. Would he have been an Independent had he not rose to power? That's a moot point, for Cromwell sounded most like an Independent when he was working for godly unity and the preservation of the parliamentary cause. He sounded most like an Independent when he was acting most publicly as a leader.

- <sup>1</sup> J.C. Davis, 'Cromwell's religion', in J. Morrill (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (Harlow, 1990), 181-7; S.R. Gardiner, *Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1899), 28-9. See also, J.C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell* (London, 2001), chapter 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Cited in Davis, 'Cromwell's religion', 184.
- <sup>3</sup> The starting point for puritanism is now J. Coffey and P.C.H. Lim (eds), *The Cambridge companion to puritanism* (Cambridge, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> Davis, 'Cromwell's religion', 184.
- <sup>5</sup> C. Hill, 'History and denominational history', *Baptist Quarterly*, 22:2 (1967), 65-71.
- <sup>6</sup> J. Morrill, 'How Oliver Cromwell thought', in J. Morrow and J. Scott (eds), *Liberty, authority, formality: Political ideas and culture, 1600-1900* (Exeter, 2008), 89.
- <sup>7</sup> Davis, 'Cromwell's religion', 182-3.
- <sup>8</sup> Davis, 'Cromwell's religion', 189, 201-8;
- <sup>9</sup> Morrill, 'How Oliver Cromwell thought', 89.
- <sup>10</sup> D. Smith (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell and the Interregnum: The essential readings* (Oxford, 2008), 141-66.
- <sup>11</sup> Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), lord protector of England, Scotland, and Ireland, *Oxford DNB*; Morrill, 'How Cromwell thought', 89-112.
- <sup>12</sup> For Cromwell's providentialism, see B. Worden, 'Providence and politics', in his *God's instruments: Political conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 2012), 33-62.
- <sup>13</sup> R.S. Paul, *The Lord Protector: Religion and politics in the life of Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1955), 67.
- <sup>14</sup> S.C. Lomas, *The letters and speeches of Oliver Cromwell, with elucidations by Thomas Carlyle* (3 vols, 1904), i. 89-90.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul, 399.

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- <sup>16</sup> Cromwell, *Oxford DNB*; J. Morrill, 'Rewriting Cromwell: A case of deafening silences', *Canadian Journal of History/Annals canadiennes d'histoire*, 38 (2003), 565-7.
- <sup>17</sup> For recent discussions, see S. Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World settlers and the call of home* (New Haven, 2007).
- <sup>18</sup> A. Barclay, *Electing Cromwell: The making of a politician* (London, 2011), 65-74
- <sup>19</sup> Paul, 46.
- <sup>20</sup> P. Collinson, 'The English conventicle', in W.J. Sheils and D. Wood (eds), *Voluntary religion* (Studies in Church History, 23, 1986), 223-59.
- <sup>21</sup> Matthew Sylvester (ed.), *Reliquiae Baxterianae, or, Mr. Richard Baxter's narrative of the most memorable passages of his life and times* (London, 1696), i. 50.
- <sup>22</sup> Sylvester, i. 51.
- <sup>23</sup> Paul, 67.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul, 67.
- <sup>25</sup> Matthew Sylvester (1636/7–1708), ejected minister, *Oxford DNB*.
- <sup>26</sup> I would like to thank John Coffey for a discussion about this event and this section of Baxter's text. Readers should be aware that a new edition of Baxter's *Reliquiae* is nearing completion.
- <sup>27</sup> C. Holmes, 'Colonel King and Lincolnshire politics, 1642-1646', *The Historical Journal*, 16:3 (Sept. 1973), 462; T. Edwards, *The second part of Gangraena* (London, 1646), 105.
- <sup>28</sup> Holmes, 462.
- <sup>29</sup> Norfolk Record Office, FC 31/1, 10 Aug. 1645.
- <sup>30</sup> For a discussion of early church gatherings see Joel Halcomb, 'A social history of congregational religious practice during the puritan revolution', PhD thesis (Cambridge, 2010), 22-36.
- <sup>31</sup> *A true relation of a great victory obtained by the Parliament forces in Lincolnshire, under the command of the Lord Willoughby, Colonel Hobart, Colonel Cromwell, Lieutenant Generall Hotham* (London, 1643), 6.
- <sup>32</sup> Keith L. Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism: A History of English and Scottish Churches of the Netherlands in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Leiden, 1982), 162-75, 226-32.
- <sup>33</sup> Norfolk Record Office, MC64/4, 508x8, 23-4, 25.
- <sup>34</sup> Paul, 64.

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- <sup>35</sup> Lomas, i. 154.
- <sup>36</sup> *Monarchy Asserted* (London, 1660), 39; Lomas iii. 65-6.
- <sup>37</sup> C. Holmes, *The Eastern Association in the English Civil War* (Cambridge, 1974), 177.
- <sup>38</sup> Lomas, i. 171.
- <sup>39</sup> An effective army needed God's support, of course.
- <sup>40</sup> Holmes, *Eastern Association*, 113.
- <sup>41</sup> Lomas, i. 156.
- <sup>42</sup> British Library, RP 522; Lomas, i. 181.
- <sup>43</sup> Paul, *Lord Protector*, 65.
- <sup>44</sup> Holmes, *Eastern Association*, 172.
- <sup>45</sup> D. Masson and J. Bruce (eds), *The quarrel between the earl of Manchester and Oliver Cromwell: An episode of the English Civil War* (Camden Society, N.S. 12, 1875), 72.
- <sup>46</sup> Sylvester, 51.
- <sup>47</sup> British Library, Add. MS 5015\*, fos 12v-13r; Lomas, i. 205.
- <sup>48</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Nalson 4, no. 80, fo. 196v; Lomas, i. 218.
- <sup>49</sup> Lomas, i. 353.
- <sup>50</sup> T. Goodwin, *et al.*, *An apologeticall narration* (London, 1644), 11-12.
- <sup>51</sup> Lomas, ii. 536.
- <sup>52</sup> Presbyterians and congregationalists emphasized this formula when arguing for accommodation between the two movements. For more, see chapter 3 of my forthcoming monograph *Congregationalism and the puritan revolution*.
- <sup>53</sup> Davis, *Cromwell*, 132.
- <sup>54</sup> Society of Antiquaries, London, SAL/MS/138, no. 128, fos 292r-v; Lomas, ii. 293.
- <sup>55</sup> Lomas, ii. 535-6.
- <sup>56</sup> Lomas, ii. 536.
- <sup>57</sup> The classic statement on congregationalism remains Geoffrey Nuttall, *Visible saints: the congregational way, 1640-1660* (Oxford, 1957). See also, Halcomb, 'Congregational religious practice'.
- <sup>58</sup> For Cromwell and toleration, see B. Worden, 'Toleration and the Protectorate', in his *God's instruments*, 63-90.



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- <sup>59</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in puritan faith and experience* (1946), 116. Nuttall provides a good discussion of the Spirit and Cromwell's statements on toleration.
- <sup>60</sup> A.S.P. Woodhouse (ed.), *Puritanism and liberty: Being the army debates (1647-49) from the Clarke Manuscripts* (London, 1938), 104.
- <sup>61</sup> Society of Antiquaries, London, SAL/MS/138, no. 128, fos 292r-v; Lomas, ii. 293.
- <sup>62</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Nalson 4, no. 80, fo. 196v; Lomas, i. 218.
- <sup>63</sup> Davis, *Cromwell*, 134-5.
- <sup>64</sup> *His Highness Speech to the Parliament in the Painted Chamber, at their Dissolution, Upon Monday the 22d of January 1654* (London, 1655), 18-19; Lomas, ii. 417-18.
- <sup>65</sup> J. Coffey, 'The toleration controversy during the English Revolution', in C. Durston and J. Maltby (eds), *Religion in revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2006), 51-3.
- <sup>66</sup> B.G. Owens (ed.), *The Ilston Book: Earliest register of Welsh Baptist* (Aberwystwyth, 1996), 101-3.
- <sup>67</sup> Owens, 103.
- <sup>68</sup> Halcomb, chapter 5; J. Bunyan, *Differences in Judgment About Water-Baptism, No Bar to Communion* (London, 1673), 101-22.

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