

# The Westminster Confession in its Historical, Social and Theological Context<sup>1</sup>

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## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Westminster Assembly was the product not simply of the internal theological life of the church, but also of the economic, social, and political forces of the time. While it is impossible to ignore the religious factors that were involved in the upheavals of English history in the 1640's and 1650's, recent studies have made it apparent that the term Puritan Revolution has to be qualified. Economic factors such as prices and land, political factors such as the increased power of Parliament or the converging of the interests of the gentry with the Puritan preachers, international factors such as the threat of continental powers played their parts, not only for English Protestants but also for English traders.<sup>2</sup>

The political preparation that preceded the Westminster Assembly was deliberate, partly from choice and partly from the force of events. The origins of the Westminster Assembly reach far back into the Puritan movement and especially into the conflict between the Puritans and the Stuart kings, James I and Charles I.<sup>3</sup> The immediate background includes Charles' attempt to force the prayer book on the Church of Scotland in 1637 as part of his effort to bring the Church of Scotland into conformity with the Episcopal Church of England. This led to the National Covenant in Greyfriar's churchyard in Edinburgh (1638), to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1638) that protested the policies of Charles, and subsequently to the First Bishops' War when Charles attempted to put down the Scottish rebel lion. Charles now had to call Parliament to raise funds, but Charles adjourned Parliament when it began listing its grievances. The controversy with the Scots continued and the Second Bishops' War broke out in 1640. Scottish troops marched into England. Charles was forced once again to call Parliament in November 1640. This Parliament continued in session until it was purged by Cromwell in 1648 and dispersed by him in 1653. Parliament was also in conflict with the King on religious as well as political and social grounds, and it regarded the invading Scottish army as an ally. This controversy erupted in a struggle that

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<sup>1</sup>*Editor's Note:* The substance of Dr. Leith's presentation at the Colloquium is contained in this excerpt (pages 23-43) from Dr. Leith's book *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973). Reprinted by permission of the author.

<sup>2</sup>For a brief summary of the interpretations of the period see: Philip A. M. Taylor, *The Origins of the English Civil War Conspiracy, Crusade, or Class Conflict* (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1960). Our age can only with difficulty understand the importance of preaching and literature in the century preceding Westminster. Great preachers were given the public adulation that is reserved today for entertainers. Forty-three percent of the books that came from English presses from the time of Claxton to 1641 had a religious theme. See Louis B. Wright, "The Significance of Religious Writings in the English Renaissance," *Journal of History of Ideas* 1, no. 1 (January 1940): 59-68.

<sup>3</sup>William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

would continue until the King had been executed in 1649 and the Protectorate established in 1653. The controversy between King and Parliament was rooted in the deep-seated religious, social, and political ferment in the whole of society. In the Root and Branch petition of 1640 a long list of theological and ecclesiastical grievances was presented Parliament by his majesty's subjects in London and in several counties of the kingdom.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently numerous petitions calling for reformation and for a synod to deal with the religious situation were presented. On December 1, 1641, the House of Commons presented the King with the Grand Remonstrance, which outlined many of the theological and ecclesiastical grievances and called for a synod. "And the better to effect the intended reformation, we desire there may be a general synod of the most grave, pious, learned and judicious divines of this island; assisted with some from foreign parts, professing the same religion with us, who may consider all things necessary for the peace and good government of the Church, and represent the results of their consultations unto the Parliament, to be there allowed of and confirmed, and receive the stamp of authority, thereby to find passage and obedience throughout the kingdom."<sup>5</sup> In April 1642, Parliament began the selection of members for the prospective Assembly. In May 1642, a bill was introduced in Parliament calling for an Assembly, but the King withheld his approval. In June 1643, both houses of Parliament, disregarding the refusal of the King, agreed upon an ordinance calling the Assembly into existence. The ordinance is specific as to the task of the Assembly and as to its limitations.

Whereas, amongst the infinite blessings of Almighty Cod upon this nation, none is or can be more dear unto us than the purity of our religion; and for that, as yet, many things remain in the Liturgy, Discipline, and Government of the Church, which do necessarily require a further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained; and whereas it hath been declared and resolved by the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament, that the present Church-government by archbishops, bishops, their chancellors, commissaries, deans, deans and chapters, archdeacons, and other ecclesiastical officers depending upon the hierarchy, is evil, and justly offensive and burdensome to the kingdom, a great impediment to reformation and growth of religion, and very prejudicial to the state and government of this kingdom; and that therefore they are resolved that the same shall be taken away, and that such a government shall be settled in the Church as may be most agreeable to God's holy word, and most apt to procure and preserve the peace of the Church at home, and nearer agreement with the Church of Scotland, and other Reformed Churches abroad; and, for the better effecting hereof, and for the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the Church of England from all false calumnies and aspersions, it is thought fit and necessary to call an Assembly of learned, godly, and judicious Divines, who, together with some members of both the Houses of Parliament, are to consult and advise of such matters and things, touching the premises, as shall be proposed unto them by both or either of the Houses of Parliament, and to give their advice and counsel therein to both or either of the said Houses, when, and as often as they shall be thereunto required:...

...the said persons, or so many of them as shall be so assembled or sit, shall have power and authority, and are hereby likewise enjoined, from time to time

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid. pp. 324 ff. Cf. Alex F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly Its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884), p. 97.

<sup>5</sup>*The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660* ed. Samuel Rawson Gardiner, third edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 229.

during this present Parliament, or until further order be taken by both the said Houses, to confer and treat among themselves of such matters and things, touching and concerning the Liturgy, Discipline, and Government of the Church of England, or the vindicating and clearing of the doctrine of the same from all false aspersions and misconstructions, as shall be proposed unto them by both or either of the said Houses of Parliament, and no other; and to deliver their opinions and advices of, or touching the matters aforesaid, as shall be most agreeable to the word of God, to both or either of the said Houses, from time to time, in such manner and sort as by both or either of the said Houses of Parliament shall be required; and the same not to divulge, by printing, writing, or otherwise, without the consent of both or either House of Parliament.

...That this Ordinance, or any thing therein contained, shall not give unto the persons aforesaid, or any of them, nor shall they in this Assembly assume to exercise any jurisdiction, power, or authority ecclesiastical whatsoever, or any other power than is herein particularly expressed.<sup>6</sup>

The Assembly convened on July 1, 1643, in the face of a prohibition and warning by Charles I, with a sermon by the Prolocutor (presiding officer), William Twisse. The first work of the Assembly was a revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles in order to remove any possibility of Arminian, Pelagian, or Roman interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

Arminianism and Romanism were slogans that connoted quite as much as they denoted. Arminianism gets its name from Arminius, the Dutch theologian who sought to modify the doctrine of predestination that was held by Reformed orthodoxy; but English Arminianism cannot be identified with the views of Arminius. It did emphasize human freedom and tended, as Tuckney charged, to make the love of God so free as to make it shallow.<sup>8</sup> But Arminianism was also identified with a more relaxed attitude toward theology and also toward the discipline of the Christian life. It was likewise associated with episcopacy and the divine right of kings. Pelagianism was closely related to Arminianism in popular theology, though Arminius had been careful to define his doctrine in distinction from Pelagianism, insisting that man could not turn to God without divine grace. Pelagius, in his controversy with Augustine in the fifth century, had exalted man's freedom and his capacity to respond to the love of God. He denied original sin, and he limited grace to revelation and man's created capacities. Romanism specifically referred to those elements in the liturgy and government of the church that the Puritans did not feel had been sufficiently reformed. It too had political implications. There were Roman Catholics with great influence in the government, and many hoped England would be a Catholic nation again. The role of Catholics in government was also a sensitive issue in foreign policy, especially when Holland, with which many English sympathized, was still in conflict with Catholic Spain. Furthermore, the Thirty Years War, which Protestants understood as an effort to exterminate the Protestant community, was still in process when the Assembly met. Arminianism and Romanism had specific theological references, but they also had a range of social and political implications that a secular

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<sup>6</sup>Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly* pp. ix-xii.

<sup>7</sup>See S. W. Carruthers, *Everyday Work of the Westminster Assembly* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Historical Society, 1943), pp 105 ff.

<sup>8</sup>Anthony Tuckney, *Forty Sermons upon Several Occasions* (London, 1676), p.

culture such as ours finds difficulty understanding. The effort to eliminate any remnants of either from the confession of the church was directed to a broad range of concerns and would orient the whole work of the Assembly. By October 12 the revision of the first fifteen Articles had been completed and work had begun on the sixteenth.<sup>9</sup> The work was never completed, but the debates and discussions served as a useful foundation for the later work on the Confession and Catechisms.

A new situation that had long been anticipated, and hoped for by some, was the occasion of another assignment. Parliament, faring badly in the war with the King during the summer of 1643, needed the support of Scotland. On August 17 a Solemn League and Covenant was approved by the Scottish Parliament, and in September it was approved by the English Parliament. The object of the Solemn League and Covenant was the defense and "preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government,... [and] the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland... according to the Word of God, and the examples of the best reformed Churches, and [the bringing of~ the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction of uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of Church government, directory for worship and catechising . . ." <sup>10</sup> On September 25, 1643, members of the Assembly and the Scottish commissioners subscribed the Solemn League and Covenant.<sup>11</sup> From this point the Assembly took a new direction.

The Solemn League and Covenant meant that the Assembly would devote a major proportion of its time to church government and worship. In these areas members of the Assembly had their deepest differences. In the end the Assembly drew up a Form of Presbyterial Government in which the Presbyterianism of Melville, Cartwright, and Travers was tempered both by the Congregationalists and by the Erastians who insisted that the church's power was limited to moral persuasion.<sup>12</sup> It also replaced the Book of Common Prayer with a Directory for Worship, that, in place of fixed forms, contained directions for worship, some of which were compromises or were ambiguous. The real consensus of the Assembly was in the area of theology, and in the Confession and Catechisms it reached its highest technical achievement.

It is important to note that the Assembly was an appointment of Parliament, not an ecclesiastical synod. Its purpose was to advise Parliament, not to act in the name of the church. Its charter allowed it no freedom of initiative and permitted advice only on such things as were proposed to the Assembly by Parliament. Members were not to divulge by printing or writing or otherwise their proceedings except with permission of Parliament. The Assembly was explicitly prohibited from assuming "to exercise any jurisdiction, power, or authority ecclesiastical whatsoever."<sup>13</sup> The members were appointed by Parliament. The lay members attended as members of Parliament, not

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<sup>9</sup>Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly*, pp. 156 ff; John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.* ed. John Rogers Pitman, 13 vols. (London: Hatchard & Son, 1824). vol. 13, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>*The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1624-1660* Gardiner, p. 268.

<sup>11</sup>Lightfoot, vol. 13, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup>The Erastians generally favor greater power of the state in affairs of the church and limited church power to moral suasion. For a general discussion of Erastianism see W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940), vol. 4, pp. 265 ff.

<sup>13</sup>Mitchell, p. 12.

as church officers, except for the Scottish lay commissioners. Robert Baillie, a Scottish commissioner, observed, "...this is no proper Assembly, but a meeting called by the Parliament to advise them in what things they are asked..."<sup>14</sup>

The Assembly carried on its theological work, however, in splendid isolation from the political and social events of the time. There is no indication that the members were put under any political pressure on theological issues. This was due to the theological consensus that was shared by the theologians and their culture. It does not mean that the theology was indifferent to political and social crises. The preaching of the members of the Assembly to Parliament and to the public always included political and social applications. Indeed, seldom has preaching been so directly applied to the events of the day. The members of the Assembly understood the happenings of their time in terms of their theology and the providence of God, and they believed that God would fulfill his purposes in England either through reform or through apocalyptic events.

### THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

The Westminster Assembly met at the end of one age and at the beginning of another. The seventeenth century marks both the decisive divide in the history of Christian thought and the beginning of the modern era. Many of the forces and ideas that have shaped the modern world were already at work in 1643. Indeed, members of the Assembly were aware, at least intellectually, of these factors. But insofar as the minutes of the Assembly reveal the concerns of the members, they were not moved by these forces, except to deny or to refute them.

The world, for the members of the Westminster Assembly, was God-centered. The great question was still, "How shall a man be saved?" When the armies of Parliament fared badly, members of the Assembly did not ask about military strategy or supplies, but about the providence of God. The kind of truth that interested the members of the Assembly was metaphysical and theological. They asked "Why?" rather than "How?" Though they knew about Copernicus, they lived and theologized in terms of the old geocentric world in which theology could easily be imagined in spatial terms.

Order was a dominant characteristic of the world in which the Assembly lived. It was the order guaranteed by the creative power and wisdom of God and maintained by his all-wise providence, in spite of man's sin. In this ordered world of the great chain of being, everything had its place.<sup>15</sup> There was a certain glory of the divine wisdom in every place, however humble. The authors of the Catechisms could speak of superiors, inferiors, and equals with none of the bad conscience that such a division of mankind arouses even in the calloused today. The surds, the chaotic events, even the mystery of human freedom in which existentialists exult today were foreign to the common experience of the men of the Assembly. It is not strange that in this well-ordered and rational world Thomas Aquinas' theology was read. For Thomas the world was also well-ordered and rational. Man by his mind could think the world and move by inference from the contingent being of human experience to the necessary being that is God.

There is a certain tension between a doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the ordered universe of the great chain of being. The personal, acting God of the Old Testament too easily

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<sup>14</sup>Robert Baillie, *The Letters and Journal of Robert Baillie 1637-1662* ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, 1841), vol. 2, p. 186. The author's spellings.

<sup>15</sup>Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being; A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936).

upset the orders of men and even of creation. It may be argued that God, as he is known in the Confession, is "ordered" by all the attributes that are ascribed to him in Chapter II of the Confession. Nevertheless, any theology with so strong a doctrine of predestination and providence is precariously related to the "ordered" universe. In part the "ordered" universe broke because of the pressures of the new age, perhaps chiefly so; but there were some who broke up the orders of the world because they believed that God willed its judgment. The tension between the personal Almighty God of the Biblical tradition and the "ordered universe" is implicit in the Confession but not explicit.

In such an intellectual climate it is clear that there is a closer relationship between the rational theology of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648~ and the theology of the Assembly than at first seems to be the case. The Assembly's theologians began with the Bible as the given source of theology, and Lord Herbert began with what he considered the common experience or notions of man. From this point on, however, there is a remarkable similarity in their theological methodologies.<sup>16</sup>

The Cambridge Platonists were not represented at the Assembly, but some of the most influential members of the Assembly were their friends. Tuckney and Arrowsmith were notably in communication with Benjamin Whichcote. The Cambridge Platonists rejected the Puritan theology of the members of the Assembly, and it is easy to note the difference in their writings. The Platonists were more open and free. They sought to hold reason and faith together and refused to set the rational in opposition to the spiritual. Natural and revealed religion differed only in way of descent. They perceived a unity and harmony in life in which man's truths and experiences participated, and they did not wish to fragment what God had joined together. Their emphasis on reason led to a concern for toleration, as man must not be coerced in the search for truth. They wanted to free religion from narrow, bitter spirits. There were clear differences between the Platonists and Puritans, as Whichcote and Tuckney perceived in their letters; but in the perspective of history they were both rationalists, with inordinate confidence in the power of the human reason to know reality and to know God. Tuckney's theology was shaped more by the classical Protestant tradition with its emphasis upon Scripture and the Christian revelation, but in the working out of his theology he shared many common assumptions with the Platonists.<sup>17</sup>

Basil Willey has commented concerning the Cambridge Platonists that in the field of theology "...we must expect to find the rationalisers largely concerned with putting an idea, and abstraction, where formerly there had been a picture. For only the abstract, only what could be conceptually stated, could claim to be real: all else was shadow, image, or at least 'type' or symbol."<sup>18</sup> These same observations apply equally to the theology of the Westminster Assembly.

The most important aspect of the cultural context of the Assembly is the breakup of the ideas and forces that had formed the intellectual world of the Assembly. A "transfer of interest" had taken place from metaphysics and theology to experiment and observation, from the "why" questions to the "how" questions. Men did not refute old, established ideas but became absorbed in new questions and concerns. As Herbert Butterfield has pointed out, Galileo (1564-1642) did not refute Aristotle's concept of motion. He simply ignored what Thomas Aquinas had said and

<sup>16</sup>Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate* trans. with an intro. By Meyrick H. Carre (Bristol: Univ. of Bristol, 1937).

<sup>17</sup>Anthony Tuckney, *Forty Sermons upon Several Occasions* (London, 1676).

<sup>18</sup>Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1953), p. 139.

sought to observe how things in motion behaved. The new man, who was just beginning to emerge when the Assembly met, was less and less asking why things happened, and asking how they happened, and how they could be controlled.<sup>19</sup>

New movements were at work in philosophy. Bacon (1561-1626) had emphasized the role of experiment and observation in knowledge. Ramus (1515-1572), who died in the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day, had challenged the binding role of authority and had likewise placed new emphasis on experience. Descartes' controversy with Voetius had broken out in Holland in 1649. His *Discourse on Method* was published in 1637 and was available in England before the Assembly met. Descartes raised doubt to the level of methodology; the way to truth is through doubt. Abelard had proposed something of the same method in theology in the twelfth century. Descartes' method was no less at variance with the theological method of the Assembly than Abelard's had been with Bernard's, the saintly but orthodox and conservative, twelfth-century churchman. However, the general climate of opinion was more favorable to Descartes than to Abelard.<sup>20</sup>

Men were also aware, as they had not been, of the existence of non-Christian religions. The very fact that the Assembly had to deal with this question in a brief and negative fashion indicates that this question was alive.<sup>21</sup> Tuckney discussed it at length in a sermon in which the traditionally orthodox answers were given.<sup>22</sup> This was also one of the primary concerns of Lord Herbert of Cherbury.<sup>23</sup> On this issue, as on others, the Assembly was not really alive in any positive way to the new forces that were developing.

The sociological context of the Assembly was Christendom or "Protestantdom." However, the movements that would increasingly shape a secular society were already at work. Members of the Assembly were themselves, in contradiction of their intentions, contributing to the emergence of the new concept of denominations.<sup>24</sup> Yet the members of the Assembly could not imagine the culture that would soon emerge, a culture in which men would be free to reject Christian presuppositions. In such a culture, theology would finally be forced to deal with questions men asked from outside the circle of faith and to face the judgement of those who rejected both Christian theology and ethics. At the time of the Reformation, Calvin had been alive to the great creative forces of humanism, and he did not seek to isolate himself as a theologian from these forces. By the time of Westminster, orthodox theology was already being carried on in isolation from the intellectual currents of the day. After Westminster, as society became increasingly secular, orthodoxy would finally become very defensive in its intellectual isolation. Theology had already begun to develop according to its own internal principles which were not in dialogue with the world, and among the orthodox it would continue to do so for a long time.

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<sup>19</sup>Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300-1800* (London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1950), pp. 77 ff; Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge: The Univ. Press, 1932), pp. 9-10.

<sup>20</sup>Willey, pp. 11 ff.

<sup>21</sup>*Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly*, Mitchell and Struthers.

<sup>22</sup>Anthony Tuckney, *None But Christ or a Sermon upon Acts 4:12*, Preached at St. Maries in Cambridge, on Commencement Sabbath, July 4, 1652 (London: John Rothwell and S. Gillibrand, 1654).

<sup>23</sup>Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *De Veritate*.

<sup>24</sup>W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ Press, 1940), vol. 4, pp. 478 ff.

Modern science was born in the seventeenth century in the fusion of mathematics and experiment.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Whitehead has called the seventeenth century the century of genius.<sup>26</sup> Newton was born in and Galileo died in 1642 just as the arrangements for the Westminster Assembly were being completed. During the lifetimes of these two men the three laws of motion and the law of gravitation were worked out. Whitehead comments: "...the lives of Descartes and Huyghens fall within the period occupied by these great terminal figures. The issue of the combined labours of these four men has some right to be considered as the greatest single intellectual success which mankind has achieved."<sup>27</sup> In addition, seventeenth-century England produced Harvey, Boyle, and Ray, pioneers in physiology, chemistry, and botany respectively. The Royal Society had its origin about 1645, precisely while the Assembly was meeting. At least two of the original nucleus of the Society were associated with the Assembly: Wallis who was a secretary of the Assembly and the first commentator on the Shorter Catechism, and Theodore Haak who was employed by the Assembly to translate a Dutch commentary on the Bible.<sup>28</sup> The strong Puritan character of the Royal Society has been noted by Douglas Bush: "Even the Royal Society of 1662 had a strong Puritan tinge. There were general affinities between Baconian science and rational Puritanism: impatience of traditional authority and useless learning; the critical and empirical instinct; the ideal of action rather than contemplation; belief in utility, progress, and reform, in the study of God's creation and in 'works' as a religious and humanitarian duty and pleasure; and—what is not really inconsistent with that—the disposition to segregate the religious and the secular, the divine and the 'natural'... It goes without saying that this active Puritan and middle-class sympathy with science contained no suspicion of the irreligious philosophy associated with Hobbes."<sup>29</sup>

The critical point that must be noted is the theological isolation of the work of the Assembly from the issues that were surely latent in the scientific development that had begun with Copernicus' publication, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium*, in 1543. In the second half of the seventeenth century, theologians such as Richard Bentley and scientists, no less than Boyle and Newton, did try to relate theology and science.<sup>30</sup> They used science in the defense of the faith as members of the Assembly felt no obvious need of doing. Perhaps it was impossible for an Assembly meeting just at the moment when the theocentric world of Christendom and the vision of the Holy Community were at their climax to be aware of the significance of the new science. Within twenty years it was painfully obvious to Milton and to others that the Holy Community had failed, and within a century and a half it was painfully obvious to Schleiermacher that a host of

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<sup>25</sup>A. R. Hall, *The Scientific Revolution 1500-1800: The Formation of the Modern Scientific Attitude* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1954), pp. 159 ff.

<sup>26</sup>Whitehead, pp. 49 ff.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid. p. 58.

<sup>28</sup>T. Sprat, *The History of the Royal Society of London 1667*, eds. J.I. Cope and H.W. Jones (St. Louis: Washington Univ. Press, 1958), p. 55, Appendix p. 65. Henry Lyons, *The Royal Society 1660-1940, A History of its Administration under its Charters* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1944), pp. 8-11.

<sup>29</sup>Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600-1660* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 270.

<sup>30</sup>John Dillenberger, *Protestant Thought and Natural Science* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1960), pp. 104 ff.



theological problems confronted the Christian community. The primary reason for relating the Westminster Assembly to the events that were taking place is not to blame the Assembly, especially for failure to achieve insights that were historically impossible, but to assess the Assembly's place in the history of Christian thought and to understand better its unique contributions as well as its flaws.

### THE THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Assembly was the beneficiary of almost 125 years of Protestant theology. It was aware of this heritage. On the one hand, it was determined to avoid innovation in theology. It did not cherish novelty. On the other hand, it was aware of a need for a "further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained."<sup>31</sup> This reformation was a purification, not a change of the Reformed faith. The conservation of the theological work of the past century, not originality, was to be the hallmark of the Assembly.

Reformed theology had achieved an amazing consensus during the first half of the seventeenth century. This was due to the network of communication that had always existed between the Reformed communities of Britain and the continent, and to the catechisms and compendiums that summarized the Reformed faith in compact, brief propositions that were designed to aid the memory. The *Compendium of Christian Theology* by Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629) was published in 1626, and while not translated into English until 1650, it still serves as an illustration of the brief, clear, and positive way in which Reformed theology was popularized and universalized in the Reformed communities of Britain and the continent.

Theological controversies were being resolved, as the issues of divine sovereignty and human freedom had been at the Synod of Dort (1619), in favor of a moderate position that could claim the allegiance of most theologians. In England the Puritans were indefatigable preachers, lecturers, and teachers who increasingly popularized a common theological vocabulary.<sup>32</sup> The phrases of the Westminster Shorter Catechism can be duplicated phrase by phrase from earlier catechisms.<sup>33</sup> Yet this was not the result of a compilation so much as it was of the theological consensus that had made these phrases the common vocabulary of theologians and laymen alike. In the increasingly pluralistic culture of our time, it is difficult to imagine the power of such a common theological vocabulary and commitment.

The theological debates were about fine points. Members of the Assembly did argue whether the atonement was accomplished by Christ's passive obedience on the cross which cancelled man's guilt or whether the atonement also included Christ's active obedience which was imputed to man as positive righteousness.<sup>34</sup> They likewise disputed about the order of the divine decrees,

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<sup>31</sup>Mitchell, p. ix. When the Assembly presented the Confession to Parliament, it wanted action to indicate to Protestant churches abroad as well as within the kingdom that Parliament never intended to innovate in matters of faith. *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* eds. Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1874), p. 291.

<sup>32</sup>Paul S. Seaver, *The Puritan Lectureships: The Politics of Religious Dissent 1560-1662* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1970).

<sup>33</sup>Mitchell

<sup>34</sup>Carruthers, p. 106.

about the way God thought of man when he elected him to his eternal destiny.<sup>35</sup> The Supralapsarians said that God first elected some men to eternal life and that creation, the fall, and redemption followed to that end. The Infralapsarians objected that God thought of man as created and fallen, and then he elected some out of the mass of perdition to eternal life and to this end provided redemption in Christ. A third point of view was not vocably represented in the Assembly. According to this position, God, seeing men as created, fallen, and redeemed, elected those who believed in Christ to eternal life.

The major issues had been decided. The language of theology had been sharpened in lengthy debates and in treatises over many years and in many places. The consequence of this heritage is the precision, clarity, comprehension, and confidence of the Confession and Catechisms. Here we have the theological climax of a very great theological era.

The members of the Assembly deliberately sought to avoid the peculiar theologies of particular schools. They intended to give expression to a generic Reformed faith that could be agreed upon by the Reformed everywhere. They consciously sought the approval of the Reformed communities of the continent as well as Britain. During the debate on the decrees of God, Edward Reynolds, one of the most influential writers of the Confession, exclaimed, "Let not us put in disputes and scholastical things into a Confession of Faith."<sup>36</sup>

The Assembly drew upon a broad theological base. Multiple theological traditions were melded in the Puritan theological consensus. First there was the notable and ancient British theological tradition. This tradition had always been characterized by a strong Biblical understanding of reality. Meyrick H. Carre in his survey of British thought points out that the dynamic, personal understanding of reality to be found in the Bible had shaped British thought from the cloister schools of Jarrow (seventh century) and York (eighth century) to the universities of the sixteenth century. "The numerous philosophies of these centuries had been engaged above all in the task of understanding and of justifying the universal religion. They were adapted in various forms to a system of divine truths and the system provided a chain of presuppositions that directed the forms by which experience was interpreted. The chief postulate was that the universe had been fashioned by a personal God who had revealed himself to men in specific ways; and the metaphysical doctrines of being, creation, becoming and end, were consequences of this postulate."<sup>37</sup> This Biblical understanding of reality was supplemented by an Augustinian theology that had been mediated through Anselm, Bradwardine, and John Wycliffe.<sup>38</sup> Augustinianism stressed the divine initiative—that God loves us and chooses us before we love him and choose him, the bondage of man's sin, and the understanding of truth that directs a man to search the depths of his interior life if he is to encounter the Divine Reality. The works of Bradwardine had been edited by William Twisse who was the Prolocutor of the Assembly.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the writing of members of the

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<sup>35</sup>*Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly*, Mitchell and Struthers, pp. 150 ff.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid* p. 151.

<sup>37</sup>Meyrick H. Carre, *Phases of Thought in England* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 224.

<sup>38</sup>Mitchell, pp. 326 ff.

<sup>39</sup>*Dictionary of National Biography* ed. Sidney Lee and others, 63 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1899), vol. 57, p. 397.

Assembly abounds in quotations from Augustine.<sup>40</sup> The Confession's emphasis upon the Divine Sovereignty and God's personal control of the world and human destiny did not depend simply upon the writings of John Calvin but first of all upon Augustine from whom Calvin himself learned much of his theology. A third element in the British intellectual tradition that Carre emphasizes was its empirical bent, which in the first part of the sixteenth century was renewed by the writings of Francis Bacon.<sup>41</sup> The awareness that thought must be tied to concrete experience certainly influenced the theology of members of the Assembly, though, as we shall see later, the failure of the writers of the Confession to keep their theology tied to experience was in part their undoing.

In addition to the native British theological tradition, the writers of the Confession drew upon the Reformed traditions of the continent.<sup>42</sup> Here too their sources were diverse. The English Puritans had learned their theology in part from the Reformed theologians of Zurich, especially Bullinger. During the reign of Mary some had taken refuge there. The correspondence of English churchmen with theologians of German-speaking Switzer land is voluminous, indicating active participation of Bullinger and others in the shaping of British Protestantism. In addition Bullinger's sermons *The Decades* were required reading for British clergy in the sixteenth century.<sup>43</sup> The influence of the Reformed theology of Geneva supplemented and gained ascendancy over that of Zurich in the latter part of the sixteenth century.<sup>44</sup> It has frequently been noted that the writers of the 1640's do not quote Calvin as frequently as might be anticipated, but due allowance must be given to the pervasive printing of Calvin's works in English during the preceding century. Professor Cremeans summarizes the evidence. "The Short-Title Catalogue... [which lists books published in English between 1475 and 1640] lists ninety six different editions of the writings of Calvin and fifty of Beza's writings. No other foreign divines have as many, Luther and Bullinger being nearest with thirty-eight each. Archbishop Parker had more books published than any other official of the Anglican Church, and he had only ten to his credit. One or more of Calvin's works were published almost every year between 1548 and 1634. Between 1578 and 1581, six to eight were published every year. Between 1548 and 1600 no other writer had nearly so many publications in English as John Calvin had. Only in the early seventeenth century was his record surpassed, and then it was by William Perkins and Henry Smith, both Calvinists."<sup>45</sup> In addition Calvin's *Institutes* became the recognized textbook of theology at Cambridge and Oxford.<sup>46</sup>

The developing covenant theology of the Puritans was a third basic influence upon the writers of the Confession in addition to the Biblical, Augustinian, empirical approach of the British

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<sup>40</sup>Tuckney; John Arrowsmith, *Armillæ Catechetica: A Chain of Principles* (Cambridge: John Field, 1659)

<sup>41</sup>Carre, p. 189.

<sup>42</sup>Charles Davis Cremeans, *The Reception of Calvinist Thought in England* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1949).

<sup>43</sup>See Henry Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger* ed. Thomas Harding, 4 vols. (Cambridge: The Univ. Press, 1850).

<sup>44</sup>Cremeans p. 82.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid. p. 65.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid. p. 82.

tradition and to the Reformed theology of the continent. Covenant theology had also developed on the continent, but the main influence on the Assembly was from within its native British tradition.

The members of the Assembly were generally committed to the theology that had developed in the classical Reformed traditions. They were not so hospitable to two of the three creative and liberalizing movements in Reformed theology during the seventeenth century: Arminianism and the theology of Saumur. British theologians had participated in the Synod of Dort. The members of the Assembly were well aware of its work. While the "ever-memorable" John Hales of Eton bade John Calvin good night at Dort, his fellow Englishmen had not.<sup>47</sup> Arminianism, with its emphasis on human freedom at the expense, its opponents said, of divine grace, had no perceptible influence on the work of the Assembly, except negatively. The school of theology at Saumur in France had sought to modify the high Calvinism of Reformed orthodoxy in many ways. It wrestled with such problems as the inspiration of the Bible, the transmission of the consequences of Adam's sin to his descendants, as well as the perennial problem of human freedom and divine grace. Members of the Assembly were aware of the theological developments at Saumur, and some may have been moderated by Amyraldus' writings on predestination; but the positive influence of the theology of Saumur was not great.<sup>48</sup> The members of the Assembly were fully committed to the Reformed consensus, and they had not yet experienced the doubts and the problems that the developing revolution in human thinking and experience would bring with it.

Covenant theology also sought to liberalize and humanize the Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century. Orthodoxy had developed a doctrine of the divine decrees that carried the theologian to the dizzy height of the mind of God. Only the very "strong" could abide in such realms for long. Covenant theology focused attention, not upon the decrees as they existed in the mind of God, but upon the working out of the decrees in history and in human experience. By incorporating covenant theology into the Confession, the doctrine of the decrees was modified, and attention was shifted to the concrete facts of experience. John Calvin had insisted that knowledge of God and knowledge of man were indissolubly related and that you could not say anything about one without saying it about the other.<sup>49</sup> This is as profound an observation as is to be found in theology and is an illustration of Calvin's insight as a theologian. In the history of doctrine when the theological attention becomes focused too exclusively upon God or man, a counteracting movement is inevitable. Covenant theology represents this swing of the pendulum, and it should be noted that it was the only liberalizing movement of the seventeenth century that was incorporated into the normative, international Calvinism.

Another factor in the theological context of the Assembly's work was the presence of Roman Catholicism on the continent. Baillie's letters express the same concern about the fate of Protestantism, the Wars of Religion, and the role of Roman Catholicism that men in the twentieth

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<sup>47</sup>Hales' letters make vivid the acrimonies and arrogance of the orthodox at Dort. In the preface to the *Golden Remains* his friend Anthony Farindon wrote: "You may please to take notice that in his younger days he was a Calvinist and even then when he was employed at that Synod, and at the well pressing 3 S. John 16 by Episcopius—There, I bid John Calvin good night, as he often told me."

<sup>48</sup>"Unhappilie Amiraute's Questions are brought in on our Assemblée. Many more loves these fancies here than I did expect. It falls out ill that Spanhim's book is so long a-coming out, whileas Amiraute's treatise goes in the Assemblée from hand to hand; yet I hope this shall goe right." Baillie, vol. 2, p. 324.

<sup>49</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, 1, 1.

century have known in the face of national socialism, communism, and the spread of alien faiths.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the Council of Trent had provided Roman Catholicism with a clear, precise, and exact statement of faith. Baillie's letters indicate that Roman Catholicism was very much in the minds of at least some of the members of the Assembly.

The Assembly was also concerned with local doctrinal aberrations such as Antinomianism, which especially attracted its attention.<sup>51</sup> The Antinomians were visible. They were so caught up in the free grace of God and in the ecstasy of the Spirit that they neglected discipline and law. If a man is in the state of grace, they said, God sees no sin in him, even if he commits murder or gets drunk. Thus the law became unnecessary for the believer. The Puritan conscience, as well as Puritan theology, reacted with vigor to any such notion. Consequently the Assembly gave careful attention to the sections of the Confession on sanctification and good works. There were other deviations from the theological norm that also concerned the Assembly. George Gillespie, one of the Scottish commissioners, reported to the General Assembly in Edinburgh that the "Confession of Faith is framed so as its great use against the floods of heresies and errors that overflow that land; nay, their intention of framing of it was to meet with all the considerable Errors of the present time, the Socinian, Arminian, Popish, Antinomian, Anabaptistian, Independent errors, etc."<sup>52</sup> Arminianism and Romanism, as has been noted, were pervasive concerns of the whole Puritan movement. Socinianism, which denied the deity of Jesus Christ, had been a persistent though small movement for a century.<sup>53</sup> Anabaptist and Independent positions affected the doctrine of the church and sacraments primarily. Most of the doctrinal deviations were not serious threats or problems for the Assembly.

It is significant that members of the Assembly were theologically unaware of the cultural, philosophical, and scientific developments that were already raising new questions for the Christian community. As has been mentioned, the Assembly either ignored these developments or summarily dismissed them. Yet in the end they would prove far more serious than the intramural doctrinal problems with which the Assembly did concern itself. The only conclusion that seems possible is that the Westminster Assembly stands at the climax of an epoch, and that those members, who must have been aware of the changes that were under way, did not significantly relate these changes to the theological task.

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<sup>50</sup>Baillie, vol. 2, pp. 81 ff.

<sup>51</sup>Mitchell and Struthers.

<sup>52</sup>Baillie, vol. 3, Appendix p. 451.

<sup>53</sup>H. John McLachlan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), pp. 9 ff.