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CROMWELL'S RELIGION

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‘THE PUBLIC PROFESSION OF THE NATION’: RELIGIOUS  
LIBERTY AND THE ENGLISH CHURCH UNDER OLIVER  
CROMWELL

*By Prof Ann Hughes*

Oliver Cromwell's career amply illustrates the tensions within Puritanism between liberty and national reformation. A good place to start is with the controversy over the printing of his letter to parliament following the royalist surrender of Bristol in September 1645. In a postscript, Cromwell praised the unity of the godly in the city as an example to the nation:

Presbyterians, Independents, all had here the same spirit of faith and prayer ... they agree here, know no names of difference; pitty it is, it should be otherwise any where: All that beleeve have the reall unity which is most glorious, because inward and spirituall in the body and to the head.

As for a unity of external ‘formes (commonly called uniformity)’, Cromwell offered a pious, but limited hope for the future, that ‘every Christian will for Peace sake, study and doe as far as Conscience will permit’, but there should be no compulsion forcing people to accept particular models of church government or worship: ‘from brethren in things of the mind, we looke for no compulsion, but that of Light and reason’. For general issues of morality and order, Cromwell clearly accepted the authority of the civil power:

In other things God hath put the sword into the Parliaments hand, for the terrour of Evill doers, and the praise of them that doe well, if any plead exemption from it, he knows not the Gospel.

But authority over tender consciences should be limited, although in his reference to ‘brethren’ Cromwell indicated this was not a call for complete religious ‘toleration’, but for ‘liberty of conscience’ for those who agreed on some (undefined) fundamentals of faith.

All this may seem unremarkable to modern readers, but in the autumn of 1645 Cromwell's intervention was partisan and deeply controversial, in a

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context where religious matters were increasingly dividing parliamentarians. The House of Commons did not print Cromwell's postscript along with his account of the city's surrender, so its subsequent circulation was unauthorised. 'Presbyterian' sympathisers in the Commons, committed to a reformed national or comprehensive church, feared support for religious liberty (frequently denounced as disorderly 'toleration') would sabotage their plans, while Cromwell was associated with their 'Independent' rivals. On his copy of the postscript, the bookseller George Thomason, a Presbyterian, had written indignantly that it had been printed by the 'Independent partie and scattered up and downe the streets last night but expressly omitted by order of the house'.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Protectorate, we can discern a search for balance between Cromwell's instinct for unity, and his undoubted sympathies for those who supported liberty for tender consciences alongside, or outside a national church. Without discussing all the conflicts and divisions of the 1640s, it is worth providing a brief outline of developments before 1653. For most opponents of Charles I in the early 1640s, a reformed national church was a clear priority. The civil war offered an opportunity, at last, to complete the reformation of a church that was 'but halfly reformed', retaining too many remnants of 'popery' in its ceremonial liturgy, and its lack of an effective structure for religious and moral transformation of the people. Initially, many opponents of the king would have accepted a modified episcopal structure, but dissatisfaction with current bishops, and rising expectations of more radical change, made such a solution rapidly unfeasible. Historians are divided over the strength of support in England for a Presbyterian church of classes and synods before 1640 but it was the obvious alternative within reformed Protestantism, despite the frequent practice amongst English Puritans of various forms of 'voluntary religion', particularly meetings of the godly for prayer, fasting and discussion of sermons. Relatively orthodox Puritans came to disagree over many issues, including the role of secular authority in ecclesiastical affairs, the relationship between individual congregations and broader, national structures, and the balance of power within congregations between officers (elders and ministers) and the people as a whole. By the mid-1640s parliamentary Puritans were bitterly divided over the nature of the national church, and the degree of liberty to be afforded alongside it. The collapse of episcopal government and the exhilarating freedom of the 1640s encouraged a range of religious

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experimentation and speculation, as significant numbers in London and in parliament's New Model Army came to reject any national church, and to challenge many positions previously taken for granted through attacks on infant baptism, Calvinist predestinarianism and the need for an educated, ordained clergy. For many, anxiety about error, heresy and separatism intensified support for an effective and compulsory national church on Presbyterian lines, but relatively respectable Puritans came to worry more about the potential for authoritarian Presbyterian clericalism. The Congregationalists or 'Independents', with whom Cromwell was most closely associated, were mostly conventionally Calvinist in doctrine, and their leaders were highly educated clerics; they did not believe in total separation from a national church, but worked for more autonomy for their gathered congregations alongside parochial structures. In the mid-1640s, however, they were more worried by Presbyterian aggression than by the more radical separatist sects. Simply put, it proved easier to unite against aggressive episcopalianism, dubbed 'prelacy', than to agree on a structure or framework to replace it.

Thus the Westminster Assembly, the synod called by parliament to draw up plans for religious reformation, worked very slowly to establish a broadly Presbyterian church structure. It was hampered by its own divisions, by the growth of radical separatism, and increasingly by anxiety within the parliament itself about clerical dominance over lay people and lay authority. By the summer of 1648 a Presbyterian church settlement, albeit one under ultimate lay control, had been enacted by parliamentary legislation, but it had only been practically (and partially) implemented in London and Lancashire. The drive for extensive liberty of conscience had become associated particularly with the New Model Army, so that Pride's purge of the parliament in December 1648 not only paved the way for the trial and execution of the king, but also marked the defeat (ultimately to prove final) of a compulsory Presbyterian church. The legislation was never repealed but no government after 1648 gave a Presbyterian church effective backing so that classes and regional associations operated only on a voluntary basis in a few committed areas.

Shortly after Pride's Purge, representatives of the more radical wings of the victorious 'Independent' coalition met at Whitehall to debate religious policy. Army officers, civilian radicals or Levellers, and their ministerial allies

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disagreed in particular over the magistrate's power in religion: some would allow none at all, some allotted to civil authority a 'negative' power to combat error and heresy, but others had a more positive understanding that the magistrate's role was also to encourage true religion, as well as broader moral and social reformation. It is with this more generous approach that Cromwell's regime is most effectively understood. In early 1649 it was summed up in the religious clauses of the *Officers' Agreement of the People* (a compromise between the Leveller and the Army programme) delivered to the Commonwealth or 'Rump' parliament. As David Smith has shown, the *Officers' Agreement* is the crucial model for the religious clauses of the 1653 *Instrument of Government* that established the Protectorate. The *Officers' Agreement* accepted the need for some national church, or, as they deemed it, a public profession, with a maintained clergy, albeit that they argued for further reformation:

It is intended that the Christian religion be held forth and recommended as the public profession in this nation, which we desire may, by the grace of God be reformed to the greatest purity in doctrine, worship and discipline according to the word of God; the instructing the people thereunto in a public way, so it be not compulsive; as also the maintaining of able teachers to that end ...is allowed to be provided ...the maintenance of which teachers may be out of a public treasury and we desire, not by tithes.

The *Instrument of Government*, similarly, declared:<sup>2</sup>

That the Christian religion, as contained in the scriptures, be held forth and recommended as the public profession of these nations; and that, as soon as may be, a provision, less subject to scruple and contention, and more certain than the present, be made for the encouragement and maintenance of able and painful teachers, for the instructing the people, and for discovery and confutation of error, heresy and whatever is contrary to sound doctrine; and until such provision be made, the present maintenance shall not be taken away or impeached.

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In both 1649 and 1653 a 'public profession' was thus held to be important, but in neither programme was it to be compulsory. The *Officers' Agreement* laid down:

That to the public profession so held forth none be compelled by penalties or otherwise; but only may be endeavoured to be won by sound doctrine, and the example of a good conversation.

Consequently, there would be broad religious liberty for Protestants: 'such as profess faith in God by Jesus Christ ... shall be protected in the profession of their faith and exercise of their religion ... in any place except such as shall be set apart for the public worship'. This was a very open definition of acceptable doctrine, although the simple phrase 'faith in God by Jesus Christ' was presumed to exclude Socinianism and other unorthodox positions on the Trinity and the divinity of Christ.

The parallel clauses in the *Instrument* were virtually the same: no one was to be compelled to follow the public profession, by penalties or otherwise; but 'endeavours' were 'to be used to win them by sound doctrine, and the example of a good conversation'. Those who professed 'faith in God by Jesus Christ' were to be protected in the exercise of their religion. The *Instrument*, again following the *Officers' Agreement*, excluded popery and prelacy from protection. In practice, as we shall see, prelacy seems to have a more precise meaning than simple support for episcopacy, probably involving an exclusive belief in episcopal government and ordination, and a denial of the validity of alternative arrangements.<sup>3</sup>

The *Instrument of Government* perhaps demonstrates slightly less confidence in religious reformation than the 1649 Agreement which, of course, was never enacted. There is less emphasis on positive endeavours for reformation, although both documents stressed the duty to combat heresy. And by 1653 the prospect of replacing the compulsory maintenance of the public ministry through tithes had become a very distant hope. The drafters of the *Instrument* worried that a voluntary system would be unable to support a learned preaching ministry, and they had been influenced by the arguments used against the moves in the Barebones parliament to abolish tithes, alleging that this would threaten property rights in general.

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How would we describe the 'public profession' at the point when Cromwell became Lord Protector? The basic organisation by parish had survived the civil war and the abolition of episcopacy, as had, amongst a majority of Puritans, a commitment to a distinct and qualified ministry, maintained, for good or ill, by tithes. Perhaps more surprisingly, lay patronage arrangements for the presentation of clergy to parish livings, remained in place, although the extensive patronage rights of the crown, the bishops and convicted royalists had fallen to the 'state', and hence, effectively, to the Protector. The vast majority of the population still attended their parish church, even though the Rump parliament had revoked the laws requiring such attendance. In most areas, however, there were formal congregations gathered around educated, ordained clergy, and more separatist groups including a variety of Baptist churches. Itinerant preachers, known as Quakers, were just beginning to gather supporters into radically distinctive congregations. The Congregational churches had a complicated, perhaps even contradictory relationship with a national church. Full membership of such churches was confined to 'visible saints' who had made a formal declaration of their faith and assurance, but most Congregationalists regarded their churches as beacons to encourage reformation of the general population. As many as 80% of the pastors of Congregational churches were willing to take public or state money (usually derived ultimately from tithes), some as salaried lecturers, but many through simultaneous service as parish ministers. The Suffolk minister John Philip emigrated to New England but returned to his parish living in 1641, gathering a congregation there in 1650 while continuing to serve his broader flock until his death in 1660. Ministers like Philip saw the gathered church as an exemplar for reformation in their wider parish community.<sup>4</sup>

As already suggested, no uniform organisation beyond the parish church had survived the disputes of the 1640s, although avowedly Presbyterian classes and other less specific voluntary associations of ministers operated in several cities and counties. This meant that there was no official national body for approving and ordaining new ministers, or organising their appointment to specific livings. Royalist and religiously offensive clerics had been largely removed in the 1640s so there was unprecedented upheaval in parish personnel. In the 1640s and early 1650s a variety of measures had been passed to augment (improve) ministers' livings using confiscated church and royalist property; ambitious in theory, these measures were

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disorganised or even chaotic in practice. The Commonwealth regime had conducted thorough surveys of parishes and their clergy, but little had been done in practice to combine small parishes or divide large ones in order to improve the pastoral effectiveness of the church, or to reduce clerical poverty. John Owen, a leading Congregationalist, close to Cromwell, had led discussions in the Rump parliament to sort all this out, but nothing had yet been legislated or implemented. As far as doctrine was concerned, the Westminster Assembly's 'Confession of Faith' and its associated catechisms had the best claim to represent orthodoxy, but Owen had also worked with Presbyterian and Congregational colleagues to formulate a more minimalist set of 'fundamentals' that all who profited from religious liberty could assent to. These discussions had foundered on resistance from those, particularly Baptists, who feared that a definitive list of agreed doctrines might prove too restrictive. A 'Blasphemy' Act of August 1650 directed against 'atheistical, blasphemous and execrable opinions' was inconsistently and patchily enforced.

In the early months of the Protectorate, Cromwell and his Council of State passed three crucial ordinances on religion that brought a degree of clarity to the public profession. An ordinance establishing 'Trustees for the Maintenance of Ministers' dealt with the tangled confusion surrounding augmentation of livings. They succeeded in organising more secure and regular payments, albeit to fewer clergymen, and made progress on dividing and uniting parishes. Two further measures dealt with the quality of the clergy. A national committee of 'Triers', more properly commissioners 'for the Approbation of Public Preachers', was established to approve new ministers and those appointed to new livings in parishes or to lectureships maintained out of public funds. Finally 'Ejectors', local lay committees, advised by ministers, were set up at county level to eject unsatisfactory or 'scandalous' ministers. These two measures were based on Owen's proposals discussed under the Rump, but they reversed his initial plans which were for national 'ejectors' and county-based 'Triers'. Cromwell was justifiably proud of his ecclesiastical legislation; as he declared to his first parliament in September 1654, in particular reference to the 'Triers':

It hath endeavoured to put a stop to that heady way, touched of likewise this day, of every man making himself a minister and a

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preacher. It hath endeavoured to settle a way for the approbation of men of piety and ability for the discharge of that work. And I think I may say, it hath committed that work to the trust of persons, both of the Presbyterian and Independent judgments, men of as known ability, piety, and integrity, as I believe any this nation hath ... they go upon such a character as the Scripture warrants to put men into that great employment; and to approve men for it, who are men who have received gifts from Him that ascended up on high.<sup>5</sup>

Cromwell's own flexible and open-minded approach to the 'public profession' facilitated participation by godly ministers across a broad spectrum of opinion – Congregationalists close to Cromwell were prominent amongst the thirty-eight 'Triers': Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Hugh Peters, William Greenhill and Philip Nye were all nominated. But the moderate Stephen Marshall also served alongside the Presbyterians Thomas Manton, Obadiah Sedgwick and Anthony Tuckney, with Henry Jessey and John Tombes representing respectable (Calvinist and non-separating) Baptists. A similar pattern is seen in the local ministers who advised the committees for scandalous ministers. The London representatives, for example, included Presbyterians Roger Drake and Lazarus Seaman, as well as Congregationalists such as Philip Nye and Matthew Barker. By 1657 Cromwell, surely exaggerating, claimed of the 'Triers', that, 'there hath not been such a service ... since the Christian religion was professed in England'. They had not relied merely on humane learning, but would not:

admit a man unless they be able to discern some of the grace of God in him .... Such a man, whose good life and conversation they could have a very good testimony of, from four or five of the neighbour ministers who knew him ... if man be of any of these judgements [Presbyterian, Independent, Anabaptist], if he have the root of the matter in him, he may be admitted.<sup>6</sup>

The testimonials referred to by Cromwell provide further evidence of the broad participation by English ministers in the work of the national church. In many cases long friendship was more important than more recent divisions over church government or 'toleration'. The Presbyterian Edmund Calamy signed a testimonial for William Greenhill, minister of a Congregational church in Stepney; early in his career Greenhill had been

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Calamy's assistant at Bury St Edmonds, and was one of the ministers who lobbied, unsuccessfully, to save the life of Calamy's friend, the Presbyterian minister Christopher Love (executed for royalist plotting in August 1651); but Greenhill was also a radical millenarian, with ties to 'fifth monarchist' congregations in the mid-1650s. In another remarkable example, Robert Skinner, the titular Bishop of Oxford, active as a secret ordainer of ministers throughout the interregnum, also signed a testimonial for one minister examined by the 'Triers', albeit in his less controversial guise as a provincial parish minister.<sup>7</sup>

That significant numbers of aspirant ministers were episcopally ordained throughout the interregnum by an energetic minority of bishops, suggests again the breadth of the Cromwellian church settlement and reinforces the view that Cromwell did not identify 'prelacy' with episcopalianism as such. Fincham and Taylor believe that John Thurloe, Cromwell's secretary of state, must have known what was going on. Yet no one was ever prosecuted. This might have been a simple by-product of religious liberty, or a conscious reaching out to former political enemies, or, most intriguingly, a deliberate policy to balance Presbyterian influence within the national church. As Cromwell complained to the Corporation of London in 1654, 'I have had boxes and rebukes on one hand and on the other, some envying me for Presbytery, others as an in-letter to all the sects and heresies in the nation'. Throughout his Protectorate Oliver Cromwell exercised his own vast religious patronage, and dealt with claims for augmentations to livings and changes to parish boundaries mostly through open-minded responses to local lobbying and petitioning. He could be as sympathetic to Presbyterians, or even Episcopalians, as he was to Congregationalists. Certainly the ex-royalist Earl of Bridgewater thought it worthwhile seeking Cromwell's approval for his presentation of the episcopalian Nicholas Bernard (and protege of James Ussher) to a Shropshire living through an attack on the Presbyterian incumbent Robert Porter as a Scottish-sympathiser and enemy of the Protectorate. Cromwell responded that he was willing to leave the nomination to Bridgewater as long as he intended the 'real good of the people' although in the end Porter survived until the Restoration.<sup>8</sup> Such an openness to local and personal networks was at the heart of all effective early modern governance. Alongside the involvement of a wide range of people in the practical functioning of Cromwell's church, we could also point to the importance of campaigns for broader moral and social

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reformation. Again, people who had very diverse views on theology or church government could agree on the need for the civil power to crack down on sexual misbehaviour, swearing and alehouses.<sup>9</sup>

There were, of course, limits to the success of Cromwell's church. Attempts to define the 'fundamentals of the faith' continued after 1653 but were never successful. In the first Protectorate parliament, Owen proposed a rather more restrictive version of Calvinist orthodoxy than he had advocated during the Rump; in recent months he had become more anxious about 'Arminian' tendencies challenging predestinarian theology through an enlarged stress on human agency. Richard Baxter, just becoming prominent in national debates, was one of Owen's fiercest critics and discussions were still going on when the parliament was dissolved. While more separatist and radical groups welcomed indeterminacy, the lack of a defined public confession intensified the anxieties of orthodox people worried about the rise of the Quakers or the persistence of Socinian views.<sup>10</sup> A second consequence of religious liberty, seen by some as a weakness, was the inability of congregations, whether gathered churches or in parishes, to discipline refractory members. Many 'Presbyterian' classes or voluntary associations of ministers, as pioneered by Baxter, supported individual pastors in catechizing their flock and in excluding the ignorant or the immoral from the sacrament of the Lord's supper. But in a religious marketplace there were ultimately no effective sanctions if someone rejected the authority of the minister, elders or church. The Cheshire minister Adam Martindale explained how a young man in his parish, facing discipline for pre-marital sex, simply went and joined the local Quakers. Similarly, the gathered church at Stepney where William Greenhill was the pastor, initiated disciplinary proceedings against one Mrs Browne of Limehouse for her 'disorderly walking', in attending John Goodwin's church, apparently because she shared his unorthodox views on salvation. The Stepney members were unsure how to proceed against her, and, in any case, in the context of religious liberty they had no power to prevent her leaving. In 1657 a former member who had become a Quaker 'disturbed' the church, but again little could be done about it.<sup>11</sup>

In Cromwell's second parliament, the conservative moves to amend the constitution on monarchical lines, also modified the religious settlement. Many had been outraged by an apparently blasphemous re-enactment of

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Christ's entry into Jerusalem by the young Quaker James Nayler, and disturbed by the uncertainty of how such behaviour could be dealt with. The old soldier Philip Skippon argued that failure of the parliament to act would mean that 'sin and judgement' would lie at the parliament's doors:

These Quakers, Ranters, Levellers, Socinians, and all sorts, bolster themselves under thirty-seven and thirty-eight of Government which, at one breath, repeals all the acts and ordinances against them. I heard the supreme magistrate say, 'It was never his intention to indulge such things', yet we see the issue of this liberty of conscience. It sits hard upon my conscience; and I choose rather to venture my discretion, than betray conscience by my silence.<sup>12</sup>

Nayler suffered severe corporal punishment and imprisonment, while the 'Humble Petition and Advice' was a significant rewriting of the *Instrument*:

That the true Protestant Christian Religion, as it is contained in the Holy Scriptures ... be held forth and asserted for the public profession of these nations; and that a Confession of Faith, to be agreed by your Highness and the Parliament ... be asserted, held forth and recommended to the people of these nations, that none may be suffered or permitted, by opprobrious words or writing, maliciously or contemptuously to revile or reproach the Confession of Faith.

Only ministers who agreed with the doctrine defined in any future 'Confession' were to receive public money, but dissent from the worship or government of the church would not disbar them. Religious liberty was now to be clearly restricted to those Protestants who believed in the Trinity: 'in Jesus Christ his eternal Son, the true God, and in the Holy Spirit, God co-equal with the Father and the Son, one God blessed for ever'. For these orthodox Protestants, however, there was still to be no compulsion to adhere to the 'public profession', provided, (in a reference particularly to the Quakers) that, 'they abuse not this liberty to the civil injury of others, or the disturbance of the peace'. An additional clause, also aimed at the Quakers, called for punishment on those who disturbed ministers in their congregation, and for new laws to be made if the existing ones were ineffective.<sup>13</sup> Again, no 'Confession of Faith' was agreed, although

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Congregationalists developed one for themselves at the 1658 Savoy Conference; this was perhaps intended to have a broader influence on a national church. The provisions of the 'Humble Petition', in any case, preserved a remarkably flexible 'public profession' and a wide degree of religious liberty. This loose, but functional and functioning settlement, did not long survive the Protectorate. As the Restoration approached, Presbyterians experienced a false dawn when the Convention of 1660 confirmed the 1640s legislation establishing their national church two days before its dissolution. Between 1660 and 1662 a 'prelatical' episcopal church was constructed excluding many former Presbyterians as well as Congregationalists, Quakers and other sects. As John Coffey has written: 'during the quarter century after 1660 England witnessed a persecution of Protestants by Protestants without parallel in seventeenth-century England'.<sup>14</sup> Presbyterians as well as more radical Protestants had reason to regret the passing of the Cromwellian 'public profession'.

- <sup>1</sup> For the printed postscript: BL. 669 f. 10 (38), Thomason's copy.
- <sup>2</sup> For the 'Officers' Agreement' and the 'Instrument', see S.R. Gardiner, ed. *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, revised, 1962), pp. 369-70, 416; David L. Smith, 'Oliver Cromwell, the first Protectorate Parliament and religious reform', *Parliamentary History*, 19 (2000), pp. 38-48.
- <sup>3</sup> I owe this last point to Elliot Vernon.
- <sup>4</sup> Joel Halcomb, 'A Social History of Congregational Practice during the Puritan Revolution', Ph. D (Cambridge University, 2009).
- <sup>5</sup> W.C. Abbott (ed.) *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1937-47), vol. 3, p. 440.
- <sup>6</sup> Abbott, ed. *Writings and Speeches*, vol. 4 p. 495.
- <sup>7</sup> Lambeth Palace Library, MS Comm III/3, register of admissions to livings by the Triers, 138; Kenneth Fincham and Stephen Taylor, 'Vital statistics: episcopal ordination and ordinands in England, 1646 -60', *English Historical Review* 126 (2011).
- <sup>8</sup> Fincham and Taylor, 'Vital statistics'; for the Bernard example, and many others, see Hughes, 'Public Profession'.

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- <sup>9</sup> See especially Bernard Capp, *England's Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum 1649-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- <sup>10</sup> See particularly here: Tim Cooper, *John Owen, Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).
- <sup>11</sup> Hughes, 'Public Profession'; Stepney Church Book, Tower Hamlets Local History Library, W/SMH/A/1/1 ff. 192r, 193r.
- <sup>12</sup> J.T. Rutt, ed, *Diary of Thomas Burton*, 4 vols. (London, 1828), 1, pp. 24-5.
- <sup>13</sup> Gardiner, ed. *Constitutional Documents*, pp. 454-5
- <sup>14</sup> John Coffey, 'The Toleration Controversy during the English Revolution', in Durston and Maltby, eds. *Religion in Revolutionary England*, pp.42-68, at p. 60.

This essay was originally given as an informal lecture at a day school organised by the Cromwell Association in October 2015, and retains much of its original character. Material has been drawn from my chapter "The public profession of these nations": the national Church in Interregnum England' in Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby, editors, *Religion in Revolutionary England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006) pp. 93-114, where more specific references can be found.

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