

To what extent did radical religious groups (such as the Fifth Monarchists, Baptists, Quakers, and Ranters) undermine the stability of political settlements in England during the 1650s?

Religious radical groups in 1650s England were greatly divided in doctrines, influence and their role in undermining political settlements, therefore they cannot be clustered into one collective. Whilst the Fifth Monarchist's millenarian expectation of Christ's return and establishment of a divine kingdom¹ potentially challenged existing institutions, their lack of popular support lessened their impact. The Quakers served as a social threat rather than a political one which was made dangerous by their disregard for upstanding legal precedent and social norms. Baptists however, whilst their doctrines challenged the view of national religious conformity, this did not translate to political subversion. Their lack of a political agenda was accentuated by how they were divided between General and Particular Baptists, each with a range of political loyalties. However, whilst Fifth Monarchists played a substantial role in directly destabilising both the Little and Protectorate parliaments, other religious radicals played indirect and secondary roles in undermining political settlements serving as an aggravating factor, but not the fundamental cause. Instead, the key causes for undermining political settlements were Cromwell's actions, incompatible ideologies and weak political structures post regicide.

The Fifth Monarchist influence over the Barebones Parliament was significant as it displays how religious radicals could destabilise political settlements and spread their influence even if they were limited in numbers. In this instance, they exposed the incompatibility between different views of a Godly rule. Following the hasty and unprecedented expulsion of the Rump in April 1653, Cromwell had no settled alternative for a new form of governance. However, following discussion between Cromwell and his officers, it was decided that a large assembly would be better for the nation, which was a decision more ideologically aligned with Thomas Harrison, rather than John Lambert.² During the period of limbo between the Rump's expulsion and the sitting of the Barebones Parliament, Thomas Harrison worked with local parishes as a recruiter and a close friend of Cromwell – hence why Cromwell accepted a form

¹ Bernard Capp, 'Godly Rule and English Millenarianism', *Past & Present*, no. 52 (1971), pp. 106–117.

² Austin Woolrych. "The Calling of Barebone's Parliament." *The English Historical Review* 80, no. 316 (1965): 492–513. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/561900>.

of Fifth Monarchist millenarianism as a way to heal and settle the nation. Cromwell had high hopes for the assembly's longevity and future seen in his 14th July speech where he expresses his sincere and heartfelt views on the goals and authority of the assembly stating 'If the poorest Christian, the most mistaken Christian, shall desire to live peaceably and quietly under you ... let him be protected'³. However the assembly itself was divided between radicals and moderates, but these were not instances of fixed political affiliation and instead slight tendencies causing many members to be moderate in one policy area but radical in another ⁴. This meant that despite there only being around twelve Fifth Monarchists (including Thomas Harrison) in the assembly, many others resonated with their ideologies. This caused a fluctuating division where members would advocate for reforms which challenged the pre-existing institution and hence political stability. For example, whilst the assembly did pass ordinances which reformed debt systems, the registry of births and laws to prevent crime – the Fifth Monarchists who viewed themselves as the heralds to the rule of Christ and his saints desired further reform and attempted to advance a millenarian conception of Godly rule. This collapsed however due to the constitutional preferences of other members who thought the assembly was no longer good for the Commonwealth.⁵ This shows how religious radicals did indeed undermine the settlement of the Barebones Parliament. The Fifth Monarchist opposition to tithes and aims to abolish the court of chancery threatened nearly all the most powerful vested interests in Puritan England whether of the clergy, the law or property.⁶ This fluid divide led the most conservative members who aimed to defend these interests to vote to dissolve and hand power back to Cromwell on 12th December 1653. Overall whilst Fifth Monarchist radicalism never intended to completely destabilise the 1653 settlement of the Nominated Assembly, it did expose the weakness of attempting to heal and settle a nation via a legislative body which was fluctuating between ideals of millenarianism and conservatism. The Fifth Monarchists did play a significant role in catalysing the collapse of the experiment of the Nominated Assembly ⁷ but this was due to ideological conflict they caused rather than them acting as a large singular disturbing force.

³ Oliver Cromwell, "Speech 1: Speech at the Opening of the Little Parliament, 14 July 1653," *The Oliver Cromwell Website*, 14 July 1653, https://www.olivercromwell.org/Letters_and_speeches/speeches/Speech_1.pdf

⁴ "Nominated Assembly," *British Civil Wars, Commonwealth and Protectorate*, accessed 24 July 2026, <https://bcw-project.org.uk/church-and-state/the-commonwealth/nominated-assembly>

⁵ Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 345.

⁶ Heath, George D. "Making the Instrument of Government." *Journal of British Studies* 6, no. 2 (1967): 15–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175109>.

⁷ Heath, George D. "Making the Instrument of Government." *Journal of British Studies* 6, no. 2 (1967): 15–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/175109>.

The Fifth Monarchists were more of a significant threat to political settlements during the protectorate than they were during the Barebones Parliament. During the Barebones Parliament, Fifth Monarchists acted as a catalyst for ideological conflict. The establishment of a protectorate was seen as a betrayal to Godly rule in the eyes of Fifth Monarchists causing them to now direct their opposition to the Protectorate regime. In anger, Harrison and his followers denounced the new regime at the cost of their commissions and their freedom, whilst the establishment of a Protectorate was a victory for John Lambert⁸, showing how Cromwell shifted away from millenarian ideals and towards a more traditional Puritan outlook for establishing a Godly rule whilst also establishing a more structured, less revolutionary new government. This meant that the revolutionaries who destroyed the old regime were now unhappy with the moderate and somewhat conservative order which replaced it causing a concrete divide between agitated Fifth Monarchists who wanted the revolution to continue and Cromwell who was seeking stability. Non-militant Fifth Monarchist opposition to the Protectorate regime can be seen through preacher Cristopher Feake who shared both Leveller views and the millenarian approach of the Fifth Monarchists.⁹ He criticised Cromwell calling him a “perjured villain” on 18th December 1653 before his arrest – showing how divide between Fifth Monarchists and traditional Puritans became political. This sense of divide, triggering Fifth Monarchists into deliberate attempts to destabilise political settlements, is evidenced further through how some Fifth Monarchists did indeed try to rebel in London. The most significant example of this is Thomas Venner who tried to overthrow Cromwell on 9th April 1657 in an aborted uprising. However, Venner was only imprisoned for 18 months, suggesting he was viewed as a fantasist rather than a revolutionary.¹⁰ Perhaps this is due to how he failed to accumulate wider millenarian support from John Rogers and Thomas Harrison who rejected his plans. It is evident that the Fifth Monarchists from December 1653 onwards did undermine political settlements more than they did previously, but they lacked sufficient power to overthrow the Protectorate. Whilst they caused inconvenience and disorder, ultimately, all they achieved was to test the limits of the religious toleration Cromwell stood for. However, opposition to the Protectorate at this time was also stemmed within financial problems tied with foreign policy failures and opposition to the monarchical structure of the Protectorate –

⁸ Heath, George D. “Cromwell and Lambert, 1653-1657.” *The Historian* 21, no. 4 (1959): 372–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24436645>.

⁹ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters: from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (1986), p. 138.

¹⁰ Shilston, Timothy G. “Thomas Venner: Fifth Monarchist or Maverick?” *Social History* 37, no. 1 (2012): 55–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41639067>.

as Cromwell could dissolve parliament and be the head of state. This was exacerbated in 1657 when the Humble petition and advice offered him the crown. Holistically however, broader constitutional crises stoked Fifth Monarchist opposition to the Protectorate whilst religious radicals made it harder for Cromwell to construct a stable settlement.

Opposition to the Protectorate was not exclusive to Fifth Monarchists as Quakers challenged the conventional beliefs which political stability rested on, acting as an indirect threat whereas Baptists were too fragmented to act as a single political force. Quakers believed in a rejection of oaths, tithes and conventional authority as they aimed to be obedient to the light of Christ within them.¹¹ This challenged the foundations of Cromwell's vision of a Godly society, however, the Quakers weren't seeking to rebel against the protectorate itself. For example, many Quaker practices defied the legitimacy of upstanding authority, for example, by refusing to use conventional titles such as 'your honour'. This could be interpreted as a direct challenge to the social order. This caused the general reaction against them to be one of hostility and fear at all levels of society.¹² On a wider scale, where Quakers were more present in areas such as Bristol, Colchester and Lancashire this could translate to how quaker religious practices led to direct conflict between individual actions and demands of a politically stable state. This means whilst Quakers did not have the same political goals as the fifth monarchists, their radical social beliefs challenged Cromwell's view of a Godly society, but not necessarily the Protectorate as a regime.

Baptists however were largely split between Particular and General Baptists, but in relation to political settlement, Baptists were diverse in ideological affiliations. For instance, many Baptists in the 1650s were republicans who were aligned with the 'good old cause' of the army. However, many of these figures such as Major General William Packer became disillusioned with the protectorate regimes overreach and lack of revolutionary reform, showing discontent with the conservatism of the new regime.¹³ Attempting to classify Baptists during this period as anti or pro Cromwell is difficult as Baptists could coexist with different political positions. However, due to political fragmentation, the threat posed by the Baptists was limited and

¹¹ Miller, John. "'A Suffering People': English Quakers and Their Neighbours c. 1650-c. 1700." *Past & Present*, no. 188 (2005): 71–103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600832>.

¹² Reay, Barry. "Popular Hostility Towards Quakers in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England." *Social History* 5, no. 3 (1980): 387–407. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4285010>.

¹³ Christopher Durston. "The Fall of Cromwell's Major-Generals." *The English Historical Review* 113, no. 450 (1998): 18–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/576177>.

instead of being a direct threat to political settlements in the 1650s, some Baptists who rejected a national church challenged religious settlements and the extent of religious liberty during the protectorate regime.

Excluding the threat posed by the Fifth Monarchists who actively attempted to destabilise political settlements following December 1653, most religious radical groups did not play a direct or deliberate role in undermining political stability and instead they catalysed underlying problems of the regime. Following the Rump's closing there was a gap in the legislature which Cromwell's officers attempted to fill whilst claiming to be led by providence.¹⁴ This led to power shifting between bodies showing instability. Furthermore, the creation of the instrument of government which established Cromwell as Lord Protector, limited parliament and consolidated the armies influence led to an array of problems. Republicans felt that Cromwell was too king-like, revolutionaries felt that they fought for parliamentary sovereignty and not the Protector whilst others felt the armies influence was preventing a return to normality – ultimately creating a regime whose legitimacy was always questioned. Furthermore, despite the influence of religious radicals, many settlements failed due to the actions of Cromwell himself who decided to forcefully dissolve the Rump, accept the title of Lord Protector and the creation of an upper house. The political climate of 1650s England was one of conflicting ideologies which regardless of Cromwell's actions made the task of healing and settling the nation by allowing for religious toleration and a suppression of radicals to maintain order difficult. Throughout the decade, whilst religious radicals did exacerbate the weaknesses of political settlements, the underlying ideological incompatibility of Cromwell's 'healing and settling' goal is what caused settlements to be undermined more so than any religious radical group.

¹⁴ Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 105.

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