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The Advent of Voluntary Societies

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the Nonconformists.[14] In the eyes of Restoration churchmen, the experiential piety of the Dissenter made religion far too easy and undermined the strenuosity necessary for authentic godliness. This mistrust of fanaticism or "enthusiasm" as elements of a Puritan piety, meant that spiritual or mystical components in Anglican devotional literature were less frequently to be found.[15] Anglicanism thus did not offer a broad range of spiritual sustenance; rather it sought to unify itself rather closely around the worship and the Sacraments as the means to live a sober and moral life.

Unfortunately, however, Holy Communion was still largely neglected by the laity. Yet in the 1680s attendance at the Sacrament (at least in London) began to increase; one reason for this surge – or at least a sign of it – was the stress within the religious societies on monthly reception of the Eucharist.[16] These societies were another energetic effort to extend the worship and moral discipline of the established Church over a sluggish nation.

The Advent of Voluntary Societies

Towards the end of the seventeenth century some members of the clergy and laity began to form themselves into voluntary associations outside the official aegis of the established Church for the purpose of personal and national, moral and religious reform. The maiden societies were the religious societies founded in 1678.[17] Aiming at the personal and devotional side of religion, they remained small-scale and private until after the Glorious Revolution, when they gave rise in 1691 to the societies for the reformation of manners[18] and

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14 McAdoo, *Structure of Caroline Moral Theology*, p. 139; Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination*, pp. 182f.

15 McAdoo, *Structure of Caroline Moral Theology*, pp. 138f.

16 Spurr, "Anglican Apologetic", pp. 236-42.

17 On the religious societies, see Woodward, *Account of the Religious Societies*, 2nd edn. (1698); G.V. Portus, *Caritas Anglicana* (London, 1912); D. Pike, "The Religious Societies in the Church of England – 1678-1743. And their Influence on John Wesley and the Methodist Movement" (M.A. thesis, University of Leeds, 1960); F.W.B. Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies, 1520-1799* (Sussex, 1963), pp. 125-34; E. Duffy, "Primitive Christianity Revived; Religious Renewal in Augustan England", in: *Renaissance and Renewal in Church History*, ed. D. Baker (Oxford, 1977), pp. 287-300. Helpful contemporary insights on the religious societies are found in: J.B. Wigers to A.H. Francke, Windsor, 10 July 1699 (ArFrSt B71a:103-09) and Samuel Wesley, "An Account of the Religious Society begun in Epworth, in the Isle of Axholm Lincolnshire, Feb: 1, An:Dom: 1701-2", printed in: McClure, pp. 178ffn2.

18 On the societies for the reformation of manners, see *An Account of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners in London and Westminster &c.* (London, 1699); Portus, *Caritas Anglicana*; D.W.R. Bahlmann, *The Moral Revolution of 1688* (New Haven, 1957); Bullock, *Voluntary Religious Societies*, pp. 135-49; T.C. Curtis and W.A. Speck, "The Societies for the Reformation of Manners", *Literature and History* 3 (1976), pp. 45-61; Duffy, "Primitive Christianity Revived", pp. 287-300; A.G. Craig, "The Movement for the Reformation of Manners, 1688-1715" (Ph.D. thesis, Edinburgh University, 1980); T. Isaacs, "The Anglican Hierarchy and the Reformation of Manners", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982), pp. 391-411.

later to the SPCK (1699),[19] and the SPG (1701).[20] The movement to establish charity schools[21] was a part of this voluntarism through its integral association with the religious societies and the SPCK.

Why did this important cluster of voluntary societies appear at this particular period of English church history? Many contemporaries both before and after 1688 had denounced the deplorable moral state of England. We have already noted the frustration of the Restoration clergy with the low state of morality and religious practice among the laity; an official report of the High Church-dominated Lower House of one of the Convocations of Canterbury in 1711 echoed similar fears over the gloomy state of religion:

> We cannot, without unspeakable Grief, reflect on that Deluge of Impiety and Licentiousness, which hath broke in upon us, and over-spread the Face of this Church and Kingdom; eminent, in former times, for Purity of Faith, and Sobriety of Manners.[22]

This report placed the major blame for this grievous state on the removal of restraints on the press in 1695 when the Licensing Act lapsed, though, as J.C. Sommerville has pointed out, the printing of popular religious literature was still booming and religion still the dominant concern of the English reading public.[23] The collapse of the disciplinary powers of the ecclesiastical courts in the wake of the Toleration Act was also pointed to as a contributing factor; the societies for the reformation of manners aimed to help fill this void.[24]

But these perceptions do not in themselves account for the rise of voluntary associations at this time; church leaders in any age are prone to indulge in similar Jeremiads about the degeneracy of their own age in comparison with the virtues of a previous golden one. Other explanations for the appearance of these societies need to be considered. It has been suggested that following the Toleration Act of 1688 with its legal sanctioning of religious pluralism, Anglicanism found itself in what seemed to be a "market situation" and felt the need to fight actively for its pre-eminence as an inclusive national Church instead of relying on the strong arm of the State to support its claims. Though still officially established, the Church felt suddenly powerless now that England was no longer a fully confessional State, as of old.[25] Voluntary societies

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19 On the SPCK, see W.O.B. Allen and E. McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the S.P.C.K., 1698-1898* (London, 1898); W.K.L. Clarke, *A History of the S.P.C.K.* (London, 1959).

20 On the SPG, see C.F. Pascoe, *Two Hundred Years of the S.P.G.*, 2 vols. (London, 1901); H.P. Thompson, *Into All Lands: The History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* (London, 1951).

21 See M.G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action*, 2nd edn. (London, 1964 [1938]).

22 *A Representation of the Present State of Religion* (London, 1711), p. 4.

23 Sommerville, *Popular Religion*, pp. 30f.

24 G.V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State 1688-1730* (Oxford, 1975), p. 22; Isaacs, "Anglican Hierarchy", pp. 391-411.

25 Bennett, *Tory Crisis*, pp. 20-22; A.D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England*

arose to fill the moral gap left by governmental inaction and to promote the Church.[26] This explanation is plausible insofar as it goes, but it is not wholly sufficient; it helps to explain the rapid growth of the voluntary societies after 1688, but not the origins of the religious societies ten years earlier.

The voluntary societies should be seen in the context of the anxieties and objectives of the Restoration Church. The same providential God who had re-established the Church of England in 1660 and assured the Church's victory over Roman Catholicism in 1688, was still waiting for the people of England to repent; Josiah Woodward's prophecy of judgment in 1698 could easily have been written twenty or thirty years earlier: "How long God has suffer'd our perverse Manners, even till both the Providences of GOD, and the Sins of Men, seem to be advanced to a full Crisis, either for our Reformation or Destruction."[27] The concern of the societies for the reformation of manners can be directly linked to the religious moralism of the previous decades; one of the clear aims of the religious societies was that of the Restoration Church: to provide further opportunities for worship and frequent reception of the Sacrament.[28]

Nevertheless, the religious societies offered something unique and fresh, outside the norm of the Anglican liturgical life: when reading Woodward's account of the societies in their early years one cannot escape the sense of spiritual renewal and revival. The spontaneous nature of the movement, the initiating and fundamental importance of preaching, the strong conviction of guilt and sin, the deep and shared emotional experiences of the participants, and their attraction to young lay people all point to a movement of renewal. It cannot be coincidental that the German Anthony Horneck (1641-1697),[29] preacher at the Savoy Chapel and founder of the religious societies, was unusual among Anglican churchmen during the Restoration in combining

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(London, 1976), pp. 8-12, 18-19; John Walsh, "Religious Societies: Methodist and Evangelical 1738-1800", in: *Voluntary Religion*, ed. W.J. Sheils and D. Wood (Oxford, 1986), p. 279.

26 See Bahlmann, *Moral Revolution*, pp. 106f; A.F.C. Bourdillon, "Introductory", in: *Voluntary Social Services*, ed. A.F.C. Bourdillon (London, 1945), pp. 6-7.

27 Woodward, *Account of Religious Societies* (1698), p. vi. About ten years earlier Woodward expressed similar sentiments in a personal letter: "O Sad! how do the moral and natural causes of our Calamitys appear and encrease dayly. God grant, that we be not even as Sodom and Gomorrha [*sic*]; our Sins are too like theirs." (Woodward to John Archer, 24 Aug. [c.1688] [BL, Eg.1844.f.12])

28 John Chamberlayne, *Magnae Britanniae Notitia: The Present State of Great Britain* (London, 1708), Part I, Book III, chap. IX, p. 276; Robert Nelson, *A Companion for the Festivals and Fasts of the Church of England*, 4th edn. (London, 1707 [1704]), p. viii; James Paterson, *Pietas Londinensis* (London, 1714), p. 209; Portus, *Caritas Anglicana*, pp. 18f.

29 On Horneck, see *A Summary Account of the Life of the truly Pious and Reverend Dr. Anth. Horneck* (London, 1697); Richard Kidder, *The Life of the Reverend Anthony Horneck* (London, 1698); Thomas Burnet, of Kemney, to the Electress Sophia [of Hanover], London, 29 July 1697, printed in: *State Papers and Correspondence*, ed. J.M. Kemble (London, 1857), pp. 193-94,196; R.B. Hone, *Lives of Eminent Christians*, 4 vols., 2nd edn. (London, 1836), ii.289-346; M. Schmidt, "Anton Horneck (1640-1697) aus Bacharach als wegweisende Gestalt in der englischen Kirchengeschichte", *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* 22 (1978), pp. 19-33; *DNB* (ix.1261f).

"careful teaching on the spiritual life with a fervent Evangelicalism".[30] Too little attention has been given to the spiritual renewal resulting from the religious societies and to the devotional motivation behind the voluntary societies as a whole. One modern historian has commented that "in a period of such apparent unassertiveness in religious matters" it is surprising that voluntary societies arose.[31] But it is not so startling if one grasps, as David Owen has rightly asserted, that within these societies a "Philanthropy of Piety" was operating which was the product of "a fervent personal religion and commitment to the service of others".[32] There were many other philanthropists active during this same period whose motives were plainly secular, aiming to assist or discipline the poor by political means or public subscription.[33] By contrast, the voluntary societies originated in the devotional piety of the religious societies at the end of the seventeenth century. Behind the activism of the SPG, the SPCK, and the societies for the reformation of manners lay the fervent spirituality of associations like those of Horneck and Woodward, in which an introspective, quasi-Puritan concern for the personal safety of the individual soul blended with the liturgical devotion of the Restoration Church. As time went on, the experiential element in the societies waned, their fervour relaxed to become more moralistic, and their philanthropic work became more of an end in itself.

The intense and private devotion of the religious societies aroused considerable suspicion among the dignitaries of the Church, even though they were for the most part officially countenanced and professed their passionate attachment to its public worship and Sacramental life. Their very existence seemed by implication to suggest that the liturgy and Holy Communion of the Church of England were insufficient of themselves to meet the spiritual needs of some of the laity. They had something of the appearance of separatistic "conventicles". It was feared that they might encourage spiritual pride among the laity, from which would result schism, dissension, and enthusiasm.[34] George Stanhope, later Dean of Canterbury, in a printed admonition to the

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30 McAdoo, *Structure of Caroline Moral Theology*, p. 157. On the debate over whether Horneck himself carried to England mystical propensities acquired from Anna Maria von Schurmann and Jean de Labadie, see G.A. Wauer, "Die Anfänge der Brüderkirche in England" ([Dr. theol.?] thesis, Leipzig, 1900), p. 41n2; Schmidt, "Anton Horneck", pp. 21f; *idem.*, "Ecumenical Activity on the Continent of Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", in: *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, ed. R. Rouse and S.C. Neill, 2nd edn. (London, 1967 [1954]), p. 105; T. Funk, *Die Anfänge der Laienmitarbeit im Methodismus* (Bremen, 1941), pp. 15f; A.W. Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism* (Nashville, 1918), p. 140; E.G. Rupp, *Religion in England 1688-1791* (Oxford, 1986), p. 291.

31 Sommerville, *Popular Religion*, p. 129.

32 *English Philanthropy 1660-1960* (London, 1965), pp. 17-20.

33 S.M. Macfarlane, "Studies in Poverty and Poor Relief at the End of the Seventeenth Century" (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1982).

34 Woodward, *Account of the Religious Societies*, pp. 135-44, dedicates one chapter to answering some of these objections.

religious societies, expressed his anxiety about the opportunities for lay religious leadership which they offered, and the difficulty of maintaining close clerical supervision over their activities. Through this small inlet might pour the indiscipline of the Commonwealth, when there existed

> ... such wild Scruples, such fantastical Opinions, such monstrous Enthusiasm, such bold Invasions of the Priestly Office, such lamentable Confusions both in Church and State; from Men's taking upon them publickly to Exercise what they call'd their Gifts in Expounding Scripture and teaching the things of God, without the previous Qualifications of Education, and Learning, and a Lawful Call to fit and Authorize them for it.

This kind of supererogatory lay piety might threaten ecclesiastical and social stability, encouraging a restless dissatisfaction with the Church and with the obligations of young persons to pursue their work or "calling".[35] Stanhope's criticisms were outweighed by general approval for the societies as nodal points for Anglican revival. But they were not entirely absurd. His suspicion that lay power in the societies would expand, was often proved true; clerical influence in them waned over time as the lay stewards exercised more and more authority and lay leaders seized their opportunity to speak and even exhort.[36]

The extent of the religious society movement is not easy to establish. The momentum seems to have slackened by the end of Anne's reign, though new societies continued to be formed here and there for decades to come. Their main strength lay in metropolitan areas, like London and Bristol. In London there were thirty in 1718, according to Thomas Bray.[37] By the 1710s their respectability was somewhat compromised by the political partisanship so characteristic of the period. Though High Churchmen feared their potential for incipient Nonconformity, Low Churchmen and Whigs – with far more justification – saw them as hotbeds of Jacobitism, especially after 1715. Under George I they lost much of their official countenance and fell into slow decline, though some societies were still functioning at the onset of the evangelical revival.[38]

From the small but still significant devotional renewal of the religious societies stemmed not only the societies for the reformation of manners, but more importantly, the two chief monuments to Anglican voluntarism: the

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35 George Stanhope, *The Duty of Rebuking. A Sermon Preach'd ... December the 28th. 1702 .... To which is added, a Post-Script to the Religious Societies* (London, 1703), pp. 21-27.

36 This development is perhaps most clearly seen by a careful comparison of Horneck's "Rules", published in 1698 by Kidder, *Anthony Horneck*, pp. 13-16, but certainly used with the earliest societies, and of the "Orders" (1698) in Woodward, *Account of the Religious Societies*, pp. 120-30.

37 Bray to Archbishop Wake, Aldgate, 21 Mar. 1718 (ChCh, *Wake MSS* 15:182-93).

38 Portus, *Caritas Anglicana*, pp. 80f, 194f. On the differences of opinion regarding the connection of the Anglican religious societies to Wesley's Methodist societies, see esp. Walsh, "Religious Societies", pp. 279-302, and H.D. Rack, "Religious Societies and the Origins of Methodism", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 38 (1987), pp. 582-95.

SPCK and the SPG. It was to the elder of these sister societies that Halle Pietists in London were drawn.

The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

The SPCK was the brain-child of the creative and far-sighted reformer Thomas Bray (1656-1730).[39] For many years he dreamed of forming an Anglican society similar to the Roman Catholic *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, which, since its founding in 1622, was the active arm of Catholicism in the spread of the faith around the world, possessing its own multi-lingual educational institutions and publication works.[40] Bray envied the missionary ardour and potent organization of the *Propaganda* and felt that Protestantism should have the same force. He wished his society to be officially chartered by the government and composed of two-thirds clergy and one-third laity.[41] This dream was eventually fulfilled in 1701 with the incorporation of the SPG; two years earlier, however, Bray had met with four friends and formed the SPCK, a voluntary society with no royal charter.

As a voluntary society the SPCK kept close connections with the religious societies and societies for the reformation of manners which preceded it; all the great church voluntary associations of this period had close links. The devotional piety of the religious societies, though apparent only in the prayers at the beginning and close of SPCK meetings, was, as C.K. Lowther Clarke has noted, "the indispensable foundation of their activities, too obvious to need mention";[42] the zeal for moral reformation manifest in the societies for the reformation of manners was also a motivating force in the SPCK. The SPCK always expressed support for the other two wings of voluntary action in England, desiring that "a good correspondence be encouraged and maintained",[43] and, in fact, became their patron; when clergy or laity around the country desired information on either religious societies or societies for the reformation of manners, they turned to the SPCK. The SPCK became the impulse and the clearinghouse for voluntaristic renewal and reformation in Britain.

Since the public was confused about the different functions of the various voluntary societies, the SPCK invited Justice Hooke, one of its founding members, "to draw up an account of the nature of this Society, and wherein it differr's from other Societys".[44] While praising the other voluntary societies,

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39 On Bray, see H.P. Thompson, *Thomas Bray* (London, 1954).

40 On the *Propaganda*, see J. Schmidlin, "Die Gründung der Propaganda Kongregation (1622)", *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 12 (1922), 1-14; cf. K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids, 1970 [1938-45]), iii.33-35.

41 Thompson, *Thomas Bray*, p. 36.

42 *History SPCK*, p. 3.

43 SPCK *Minutes*, 2 May 1700, printed in: McClure, pp. 62f.

44 *Ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1700, printed in: McClure, p. 44.