



Edward Vallance. *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant: State Oaths, Protestantism and the Political Nation.* Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005. 263 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-118-1.



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Published on H-Albion (October, 2006)

Of Covenants and Kings

Edward Vallance's study explores the religious and political background to the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 and its impact upon the religious and political thinking of the English political nation. A number of interesting and curious aspects of English political understanding emerge from this essentially Protestant and parliamentary adventure in associative behavior where, unlike the more familiar state oaths of allegiance and supremacy, God was directly involved "as a party" (p. 127).

The work falls into two parts. Part 1, "The Long Parliament and the National Covenant," addresses the various parliamentary attempts to arrive at a form of words that would capture the nature of the association that the mainstream parliamentary opposition sought to secure against a misled and potentially idolatrous monarch. Part 2 considers "The Solemn League and Covenant," or, more precisely, the conditions of its emergence in the somewhat obscure parliamentary negotiations for an alliance with the Scots in the troubled summer of 1643. This section also examines the interpretation of the obligation imposed by the device, and the debates it stimu-

lated, first amongst those who envisaged it leading to a far more radical political and religious settlement prior to 1649, then by opponents and proponents of the regicide, Commonwealth, and the restored monarchy after 1660. An epilogue considers the continuation of the covenanting endeavor into the eighteenth century, where the device lost the "apocalyptic expectations" (p. 216) invested in it in the 1640s, whilst the conclusion maintains that we need to qualitatively adjust, in the light of the covenanting experience, "how we characterize the mainstream of Parliamentary resistance thought" (p. 219). Vallance also concludes with the intriguing, but undeveloped afterthought, that the English political experience of covenanting casts doubt on the currently fashionable view of an emerging seventeenth-century "public sphere" via the communicative practices of popular politics.

The public sphere notwithstanding, Vallance's work has significantly fleshed out our understanding of covenanting and its implications for associational behavior within and beyond the confines of the English political nation. Vallance's assiduous archival efforts in es-

establishing the extent of public subscription to devices like the Solemn League and Covenant reinforces the view that these devices were both widely tendered and widely taken during the seventeenth century. Moreover, as Vallance shows, these sources “usually treated only as data ... can also be viewed as political texts.” As political, or more precisely theologico-political texts, moreover, the parliamentary covenants sought both to define the character of political and religious association and “to purge the land of idolatry.” This latter, and (in the context of the civil war), chiliastic millennial, tendency “overrode social and political norms of behaviour” (p. 219).

In this context, Vallance rightly emphasizes the neglected religious radicalism of the “moderate” majority (who sat in the Long Parliament), which radicalism they displayed in their various Associations and other devices promulgated between 1641 and 1643. He further evinces how the discursive platform this theory and practice of association articulated, also offered an important resource for both Leveller and Digger agitators to advance far more radical (but ultimately less influential) views of political obligation after 1647.

Vallance thus identifies and persuasively outlines a distinctive and neglected English practice of covenanting that dates from the Reformation and the critical political impact of European federal theology upon the English and Scottish Protestant mind from the late sixteenth century and which was successfully adapted to a variety of changing and challenging political circumstances in the course of the seventeenth century. In its English manifestation, it first assumed the form of an oath of association, both to secure the safety of the person of Elizabeth I and to ensure the Protestant succession after 1584. This link between a zealous and apparently spontaneous assertion of confessional identity and loyalty constituted the backdrop to the subsequent Protestations, Vows, and Covenants that parliament promoted, without the King’s consent, between 1641 and 1643.

In other words, the device was a radical test, as well as a text, and the terms of subscription to it posed, during the Civil War and its aftermath, worrying and largely unanticipated moral and political questions. In particular, the political and religious circumstances surrounding the promulgation of the Solemn League and Covenant, and its subsequent tendering to compounding Royalists after 1644, troubled and vexed the consciences of both its proponents and opponents. Indeed, the claim in the third clause of the covenant, “to preserve and defend the King’s majesty, person and authority” seemed honored only in

the breach after 1643 and left its proponents open to the charge of both moral hypocrisy and disloyalty after the King’s trial and execution by parliamentary authority in 1649.

It is not entirely surprising therefore that, at the Restoration, the Covenant was publicly burnt as an unlawful oath, or that after 1689 such bonds were viewed increasingly in less zealous and more politically pragmatic terms. It is in this confused moral terrain that Vallance’s study could have benefited from a more nuanced consideration of the casuistry that attended the discussion of devices like the Covenant, and permeated the political and religious debates of the seventeenth century. In this context, Royalist casuists, like Robert Sanderson, had a point when they treated the device’s attempt to bind the consciences of Englishmen as questionable and ultimately illegal. For despite its resemblance to the form of a state oath, and engendering a similar moral bond, covenants constituted for those who promoted it something more than this, whilst for those who questioned its legitimacy, it represented something innovatory and unwarranted in English common law, the ultimate provenance of state oaths since the twelfth century. Consequently, the zealous promotion of the Covenant had a tendency to divide as much as to unite the political nation and, ultimately, as its subsequent history demonstrated, failed to build the apocalyptic enterprise association that the moral entrepreneurs of the Long Parliament fondly envisaged. Significantly, the more judicious post-Restoration commentators on the enthusiasm of the 1640s regarded covenanting behavior hypocritical rather than moral in its political intention and outcome. As Samuel Butler asked rhetorically in his great civil war satire, *Hudibras* (1663-1678), “did not our worthies of the house, before they broke the peace break vows?” Perjury left the proponents of the covenant open to Dryden’s accusation of Achitophelism, where public zeal seemingly cancelled private crime.

From a royalist and increasingly skeptical perspective, then, parliamentary radicalism had appropriated a conservative device for a revolutionary purpose, undermining the constitution in the process. Such a practice, as a number of neglected Anglican casuists observed, was both morally ambiguous and politically damaging. More particularly, it gave credence to the subsequent compounding royalist; Leveller and Digger view that such ambivalent bonds bound only as far as circumstances permitted, or as far as an individual conscience might consider them obligatory. Here moral doubt troubled only the fool or the honest man, whilst

the knave, as Butler again observed, could never be thus snared. Such interpretive flexibility ultimately undermined the covenants associative purpose. As Thomas Hobbes demonstrated, all covenants ultimately depended neither on a supervening moral or legal obligation, but upon the sovereign authority that demanded and enforced them.

Scepticism notwithstanding, this is an important study which reveals the neglected climate of moral enthusiasm and religious ambiguity that shaped Civil War and Restoration political thought and practice.

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Citation: David Martin Jones. Review of Vallance, Edward, *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant: State Oaths, Protestantism and the Political Nation*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

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