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PRIVATE CONSCIENCE AND PUBLIC DUTY IN THE WRITINGS OF CHARLES I

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ABSTRACT. *It has become orthodox to criticize Charles I for his failure as a politician. Such criticism is both accurate and anachronistic. It fails to appreciate that for Charles the business of kingship was not the art of politics but the pursuit of conscience. Charles took to heart his father's injunctions to follow conscience and he obeyed them rigidly. Through the study of speeches, letters and royal prayers this essay examines the centrality of conscience to Charles I's kingship. It shows how the divisions of the 1640s led him temporarily to abandon conscience, and finally it studies the king's self-construction as the conscience of the commonwealth – the central stance of the* Eikon Basilike.

Perhaps no monarch in English history succeeded to the throne better briefed in the responsibilities of office than Charles I. Though James had penned it for his elder son and, primarily, for a Scottish context, his *Basilikon Doron* passed, as if by inheritance, to Prince Charles on Henry's death. As James himself put it in 1619, Henry having died, 'it now belongs to my only son Charles who succeeds to it by right as well as to all the rest of his brother's goods'.[1] The *Basilikon Doron* was not the only book of 'instructions' James bequeathed to his son. In 1618 and 1619 James wrote meditations on chapters of the books of St Matthew and Chronicles, works which began as personal meditations but which he published and dedicated to Charles because 'I apprehended that it would be a good pattern to put inheritors to kingdoms in mind of their calling…'[2] And if paternal injunction itself was not enough, the editor of James I's *Workes*, Bishop James Montague, dedicated the volume to Charles, presenting it as 'a portion of your inheritance'. 'Let these workes therefore most gracious Prince', Montague enjoined from the pulpit of his preface, 'lie before you as a Patterne; you cannot have a better. Neither doth the Honour of a good sonne consist in anything more than in imitating the good Presidents of a good father.'[3] These, Montague explained to his royal reader, and all readers, were works that carried 'in them so much divine truth and light' which might 'operate' on the 'conscience' of men, to lead them to that truth and light. 'God

[1] *The workes of the most high and mighty Prince James* (1616), dedication to Prince Charles; James I, *A meditation upon the Lords Prayer* (1619, STC 14384), sig. A4; J. Craigie, ed., *The Basilikon Doron of James VI* (2 vols., Scottish Text Society, Edinburgh, 1944–50).

[2] James I, *A meditation upon the …XXVII chapter of St Matthew* (1620, STC 14382), epistle dedicatory to Charles; *Meditation upon the Lords Prayer*.

[3] *Workes of Prince James*, dedication.

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hath given us a Solomon.' It was for Solomon's only surviving son to be an 'alter idem, a second self'.[4]

In his *Remonstrance for the right of kings*, James had, quite conventionally, asserted that the duty of a son to obey his father was enshrined in the law of nature; that it was an obligation to God the Father as well as the natural parent.[5] From such a premise James, again conventionally, developed the idea and articulated the language of the king being father to his subjects. The latter, by the law of nature, owed the king obedience as he was similarly bound to love, protect them and govern for their good.[6] In reality, in the most personal and particular cases, James's relationships with his sons fell somewhat short of the ideal. Henry clashed with his father over matters of policies and style and, it has been argued, established a court that became a centre of opposition to James.[7] As for Charles, from quite an early age, there was evidently a chilly distance between father and son. James seems to have devoted more of his paternal affection to his favourites, especially Buckingham, his 'child', who reciprocated by addressing himself to his 'dear Dad'. Charles was left to seek Buckingham's mediation with his father when James 'ill interpreted' his son.[8] Moreover, the differences of style were profound. James, as Jenny Wormald has demonstrated, was very much the product of his Scottish environment and upbringing. He was informal, familiar and jocular; he could be bawdy, coarse and crude. Despite his strictures to the contrary, he overindulged in the drink – and perhaps other vices – he anathematized.[9] Charles by contrast was chaste, prudish and moderate in his appetite. His court, unlike James's, was a model of decorum; if Bishop Burnet is to be believed, he was alienated by his father's 'light and familiar ways'.[10] And yet, Charles never spoke of his father but with reverence, nor referred to his policies (as in Scotland for example) but as a pattern. It may be that, as king as well as prince, Charles displayed a '*dutiful* respect and love' for his father rather than personal warmth.[11] But it is worth remembering that, for all his protestations of consistency between his 'theory' and 'practice', what James wrote was quite other than how he behaved.[12] It was therefore quite possible for his son genuinely to embrace his father's 'instructions', even follow the 'pattern' of his *Workes*, whilst rejecting James's personal example.[13]

[4] Ibid. preface to the reader.

[5] James I, *A remonstrance for the right of kings*, in C. H. McIlwain, ed., *The political works of James I* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), pp. 224ff. [6] e.g. McIlwain, *Political works of James I*, p. 307.

[7] See R. Strong, *Henry Prince of Wales and England's lost Renaissance* (London, 1986), esp. ch. 2.

[8] J. O. Halliwell, *Letters of the kings of England* (2 vols., London, 1848) II, 122, 149, 158–9; G. P. V. Akrigg ed., *Letters of King James VI and I* (London, 1984), pp. 373–4, 376, 386–7.

[9] J. Wormald, 'King James VI and I: two kings or one?', *History*, LXVIII (1983), 187–209.

[10] Quoted in M. Lee, *The road to revolution* (Urbana, 1985), p. 6.

[11] Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 122.

[12] *Workes of Prince James*, p. 279; K. Sharpe, 'Private conscience and public duty in the writings of James VI and I', in J. Morrill, P. Slack, and D. Woolf, eds., *Public duty and private conscience in seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 99–100.

[13] *The workes of the most high and mighty Prince James* (1620) (Bodleian Lib. Vet A2 C17), dedication to Prince Charles.

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There is much to suggest that Charles quite literally took his father's words to heart. He annotated and corrected a volume of his father's poetry.[14] In proclamations and speeches he echoes phrases and passages from those which, as James himself tells us, his father penned himself.[15] Adages and advice that James wrote or uttered, Charles repeated or paraphrased into his own words. Various collections of axioms of the two monarchs ascribe to both the same adages and there is no reason to attribute the dual ascription to confusion.[16] Even the frontispiece of the *Eikon Basilike*, depicting Charles holding a crown of thorns, may have owed much to the *Meditation* on verses of St Matthew that James had dedicated to his son, telling him 'the crown of thorns went never out of my mind remembering the thorny cares which a King... must be subject unto'.[17] Charles, we know, took particular comfort from the coincidence that the twenty-seventh chapter of St Matthew was the reading for the day he ascended the scaffold. Perhaps he did so not least because his father in his *Meditation* on the same passage had urged his son to 'prepare yourself for the worst'.[18] It would appear that Charles literally followed Montague's injunction to take his father's *Workes* as a pattern. Not for nothing in one of the few Jacobean royal family portraits does Charles stand next to the Bible and James's *Workes*, as the inheritor of the divine word of both a heavenly and natural father.[19] Even after his death, James was represented as enthroned, with his son, the new king, standing as his word become flesh.[20]

James left the *Basilikon Doron* as 'my testament' and 'your counsellor', urging his son to keep it by him as had Alexander the Illiads of Homer.[21] Charles's sense of duty and conscience were – to a degree greater than we have appreciated – formed and shaped by it. The first book details 'a King's Christian Duty Towards God'. James instructs his successor to frame his affections according to the rules set down in scripture, to take the bible as a mirror for self-examination, to fear as well as love God. He enjoins the prince to be 'a loving nourish father to the Church', to be a benefactor to the ministry, and to punish the enemies of the church – the puritans – 'in case they refuse to obey the law'.[22] Accordingly, the Prince Charles who was taunted by his elder brother as fitter to be an archbishop than a monarch became the most unerastian of kings, praised by Bishop Wren as a protector of the church.[23] Charles never doubted, as he passed on the words to his own son, that 'the chiefest duty of a King is to maintain the true religion'.[24] He endeavoured to

[14] London, British Library, MS Add 24195.

[15] *Commons debates 1621*, ed. W. Notestein, F. H. Relf and H. Simpson (7 vols., New Haven, 1935), IV, 71.

[16] Cf. *The princely pelican* (1649) and *Effata regalia: aphorismes divine, moral, politick... of Charles I*, (1661), with *Flores Regii* (1627); B.A. *King James his apothegmes or table talk* (1643) and *Regales aphorismi; or a royal chain of golden sentences* (1650). See too *Witty apothegmes delivered... by King James, King Charles* (1658).

[17] James I, *Meditation upon St Matthew*, epistle dedicatory.

[18] Ibid; F. Hargrave, *A complete collection of state trials* (11 vols., London, 1776–81), I, 1042.

[19] See J. Goldberg, *James I and the politics of literature* (Baltimore and London, 1983), plate, p. 92.

[20] Ibid. plate p. 93.

[21] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 8.

[22] Ibid. pp. 16, 24–52, 78, 80.

[23] See C. Carlton, *Charles I, The personal monarch* (London, 1983), p. 10 and note.

[24] Halliwell, *Letters*, II, 417.

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increase the wealth and power of the clergy, protect the church from its enemies, and preserve the authority of the episcopate. In the end he also knew 'my obligation to be' never 'to abandon God's cause'.[25]

The second book of the *Basilikon Doron* concerned a 'King's duty in his office'. It urged the prince always to retain an awful sense of his responsibility for the protection and welfare of the commonwealth for whose good rather than his own he was born. What differentiated, James wrote, a legitimate king from a tyrant, was that 'the one acknowledgeth himself ordained for his people, having received from God a burden of government whereof he must be countable... the other thinketh his people ordained for him...'.[26] The good king subjected his own desires 'ever thinking the common interest his chiefest particular'.[27] No less than his father, Charles felt 'daily and nightly' the cares and burden of his office.[28] It is, he told his parliament in 1628, 'my duty most of all' as well as 'everyone of yours according to his degree... to seek the maintenance of this church and commonwealth.'[29] Perhaps because the strains of political problems bore on him more than on his father, Charles more stridently stressed the need for 'affection to the public' to triumph over private interests.[30] More, perhaps, than his father he thought of a 'state' to which, no less than his subjects, he owed his service.[31] 'I have a trust', he put it at his trial, 'committed to me by God... I will not betray it.' For Charles, as for James, 'power' was not the agency of the royal will but the means, granted by God – 'lent unto us', as Charles put it – to execute that trust.[32] If the monarch extended his power, James had advised in 1620, it would only be 'where necessity shall require it' to fulfil his responsibility.[33] So Charles argued in 1642 against those who sought to divest him of the militia: 'that he cannot consent to divest himself of the just power which God and the laws... have placed in him for the defence of his people.'[34] 'Nature and duty' bound the king to have 'most care of your preservations', he had announced in the 1620s.[35] Even in more adverse circumstances, he maintained that 'without the power which is now asked from us, we shall not be able to discharge that trust'.[36] When Charles spoke of the obligations to 'the general good of my kingdom... which I am bound to preserve' before 'my own interests', we can almost hear him echo his father's own words and injunction to make the discharge of his responsibility 'the principal butt ye shoot at'.[37]

As he detailed the policies and principles of good kingship, James penned a script for the reign of his second son. Behind Charles's injunctions against enclosures and depopulators we read his father's instructions to check proud oppressors and proffer justice to poor and rich alike.[38] From James's defence of

[25] Ibid. II, 384. [26] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 54. [27] Ibid.
[28] James I, *Meditation upon St Matthew*, epistle dedicatory.
[29] *Cobbett's parliamentary history of England* (London, 1867), II, 218.
[30] Ibid.; K. Sharpe, *The personal rule of Charles I* (New Haven and London, 1992), pp. 194–5.
[31] *The workes of Charles I* (2 vols., 1662), I, 430. [32] *Cobbett's parliamentary history*, II, 352.
[33] James I, *Meditation upon St Matthew*, p. 124. [34] *Cobbett's parliamentary history*, II, 1107.
[35] Ibid. II, 218. [36] *Works of Charles I*, II, 98.
[37] *Eikon Basilike* (London, 1876), p. 31; *Basilikon Doron*, I, 206.
[38] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 68ff.

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'plays and lawful games in May', 'good cheer at Yule' and innocent recreation on Sundays, Charles, like his father, drew his *Book of Sports*.[39] The court of Charles I, the 'most regular and splendid in Christendom', seems almost to have been fashioned according to the blueprint of the *Basilikon Doron*, where James counselled the temperance, virtue and godliness from which his own court fell so sadly short.[40] Only from James's advice to 'hold no Parliaments but for necessity of new laws' did Charles obviously dissent, assembling those of 1626 and 1629, for example, more to resolve a problem than to pursue a legislative programme.[41] For all the differences of their style and between their practice, Charles most often followed his father's advice to the letter.

Indeed, even in his most personal habits and demeanour, Charles regarded it as his duty to obey his father's decree, having no more the freedom of his own passions or body, than James had of a son who was 'heir apparent to our body politic' as well as his natural child.[42] James laid down the curriculum for a prince's education: in history and mathematics as well as Holy Writ, and in active, physical exercise as well as contemplative study.[43] A connoisseur, expert horseman, musician, student of history, inventor and lover of antiquities, Charles became the embodiment of his father's belief that 'all arts and sciences are linked every one with other', as he took 'the counsel of all crafts'.[44] In his moderation in food, drink and dress, and in remaining 'pure' until marriage and faithful afterwards, Charles lived according to his father's dictates. Even his wife he endeavoured to govern by James's precepts, not permitting her (for most of his reign) 'to meddle with the politic government of the commonwealth'.[45] Most of all, tutored by his father as well as by experience that 'people are naturally inclined to counterfeit... their Princes' manners', Charles followed 'a virtuous life in his own person', so that his 'good example' might aid the 'alluring of his subjects to the love of virtue'.[46] In his own words, Charles sought to stand as a 'rule of order', or, as James put it, the 'vive image' of God, the 'author of all virtue'.[47]

That last injunction reminds us that, though the tensions of a perceived reality occasionally fractured it, James adhered still to the ideal that the good ruler was the good Christian, that government was an ethical activity. 'As you are a good christian', he opened his book on the duties of the regal office, '*so* you may be a good king.'[48] Indeed, the repetition of an ideal and prescription that had been theoretically challenged by Machiavelli surpassed naïveté and nostalgia. James appears to have believed that the monarch, by resolving the contradictions within his own person – between the public and private interest,

[39] Ibid. I, 94–5; S. R. Gardiner, *Constitutional documents of the puritan revolution* (Oxford, 1906), pp. 99–103.

[40] Sir Philip Warwick, *Memoirs of the reign of King Charles I* (1701), p. 113; *Basilikon Doron*, I, 136.

[41] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 60. [42] Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Salisbury XV*, 302.

[43] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 34, 142–52; *Meditation upon St Matthew*, dedication.

[44] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 142, 144. [45] Ibid. I, 134; Sharpe, *Personal rule*, pp. 172–3.

[46] *Basilikon Doron I*, 102–4.

[47] Ibid. I, 160; J. F. Larkin, ed., *Stuart royal proclamations: II, proclamations of King Charles, 1625–1646* (Oxford, 1983), p. 80; Public Record Office (PRO), LC5/180, p. 1.

[48] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 52.

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order and anarchy, the moral and the expedient – might ease the tension that threatened the commonwealth.[49] Accordingly, James stressed to his son the importance of an 'agreeance and conformity ... betwixt his outward behaviour ... and the virtuous quality of his mind', and the need to present an image of self-regulation as a didactic microcosmic model for society. 'He cannot be thought worthy to rule and command others', he urged, 'that cannot rule ... his own proper affections and unreasonable appetites.'[50] A king, by contrast, who mastered his own passions made his 'own life ... a law book and a mirror to your people, that therein they may read the practice of their own laws'.[51] In the end, then, good kingship came down to self-regulation, the willingness to order oneself according to God's divine decree, the knowledge of which he had planted in all created man, and especially his lieutenant on earth. It was, in fact, a matter of conscience. 'Above all then (my son)', James counselled first Henry, then Charles, 'labour to keep sound this conscience'; 'Remember ... in all your actions of the great account you are one day to make ...'.[52] Because, even more than his father, Charles daily laboured and never forgot, he encountered greater difficulties in the exercise of his office.

Certainly Charles held firmly to the idea that public actions no less than private should be conducted by the same ethical codes. 'As for princely policy', he once put it, 'I hold none better than sincere piety':[53] the good king was the good Christian. Where James, however, had been in practice prepared to act 'politically', Charles for most of his life took the injunction literally as a working rule of government. Circumstances and experience made it ever more obvious that not all princes shunned Machiavelli's contrary precepts and some at home counselled courses that separated strategy from morality. Charles's own frequent references to 'policy' even echo their language. He recognized that some spoke, and might even believe *he* spoke and wrote, 'out of design or policy'.[54] He was ready to acknowledge that in treating one did not offer concessions all at once, reserving some 'to be drawn on by degrees upon debates'.[55] But for the most part, Charles's perception of this disjuncture between moral and politic courses led not to an acceptance of realpolitik, rather to a determination to do what he thought right, even if it was quite evidently *not* good strategy. One of the things, Charles said, that he most disliked the puritans for was their belief that their ends justified their means; for 'what good man had not rather want anything ... than obtain it by unlawful and irreligious means'.[56]

This is I suppose what Conrad Russell and John Reeve mean when they describe Charles I as a poor politician, unfit for rule.[57] This is a judgement

[49] K. Sharpe, 'Private conscience and public duty', pp. 87–9.

[50] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 15, 24. Charles paraphrased this adage in a margin note to his copy of Bacon's *Advancement of learning* (1640).

[51] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 104.

[52] Ibid. I, 42–4.

[53] *The princely pelican*, p. 5.

[54] *Works of Charles I*, II, 326.

[55] W. Bray ed., *Memoirs illustrative of the life and writings of John Evelyn Esq*. (London, 1818), pp. 84–5.

[56] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 41.

[57] L. J. Reeve, *Charles I and the road to personal rule* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 3–4 and passim; C. Russell, *The causes of the English civil war* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 8 and passim.

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both accurate and anachronistic, for while we are ready to accept a 'political sphere' of action at times divorced from morality and even admire it, the early modern age, whatever some practised, in theory did not. Charles thought his first responsibility was to do according to God's dictates, as his reason and conscience discerned them, rather than act 'politically'. 'A king', he explained, 'having so many strictures of conscience upon him had *least liberty of prudence*.'[58] And (he maintained), as if in posthumous answer to Conrad Russell, 'if the straitness of my conscience will not give me leave to swallow down such camels as others do of sacrilege and injustice... they have no more cause to quarrel with me than... that my throat is not so wide as theirs'; 'although I may seem a less politician to men yet I need no secret distinctions or evasions before God'.[59] During the 1640s, as we shall see, circumstances fractured Charles's moral universe to present a stark choice between political compromise and moral principle. Charles continued to claim their harmony: 'the best rule of policy', he argued, 'is to prefer... the peace of conscience before the preservation of kingdoms'.[60] Though under pressure he dabbled with them, and in doing so gained a reputation for duplicity, only after he suspended experiments at compromise to resume a rigid stand was 'His Majesty... very much at ease with himself, for having fulfilled the offices both of a Christian and of a King.'[61] Ironically, it was ultimately through death that he reconciled them.

The king's tongue, James had written in the *Basilikon Doron*, should be 'the messenger of the mind'; what he said and promised should be what he meant, and meant to perform.[62] Again, as I have argued, James was occasionally willing in practice to encourage expectations that he did not propose to fulfil or hint at intentions that he did not hold.[63] And once again Charles appears to have more rigidly followed his father's theory than his example. Evidently he believed strongly in the sanctity of oaths and promises – be they to his ministers, foreign princes, his wife, or the commonwealth as a whole. So when he was about to recommend the bishop of Ross for the see of Elphin in Ireland, Charles, remembering that he had promised the nomination to Wentworth, informed his Lord Deputy, that 'if you will hold me strictly to my engagement, I cannot go from it'.[64] No less the promise Charles made to respect Henrietta Maria's religion he kept despite personal as well as political problems and though, as he told her frankly, 'the oath I took not to seek to convert thee hath been of great prejudice to me'.[65] Even in matters of diplomacy, Charles, though willing to take refuge in unspecific phrases, was not ready blatantly to deceive. In 1627 he ordered Buckingham to be careful in laying out his manifesto to the Huguenots lest circumstances forced him to renege on a

[58] Ibid. p. 16. [59] *Eikon Basilike*, pp. 25, 70. [60] *Effata Regalia*, p. 3.
[61] *Works of Charles I*, p. 263. [62] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 178–82.
[63] Sharpe, 'Private conscience and public duty', pp. 99–100 and passim.
[64] Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 321.
[65] J. Bruce ed., *Charles I in 1646: Letters of King Charles I to Queen Henrietta Maria* (Camden Society, 63, London, 1856), p. 22.

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declaration, 'which I should be loath should fall out'.[66] Even in August 1641 when it was not to his best advantage to fulfil his promise, he believed himself 'so far now engaged to the Spanish ambassador...that I cannot now go back'.[67] At home Charles frequently assured his parliaments that he would perform what he promised. And for all the disputes about what had been agreed in 1628, he sincerely felt in 1640 that 'I never said anything in way of favour to my people but that, by grace of God, I will really and punctually perform it'.[68]

His own obligation to honour his coronation oath and promises, Charles believed, imposed on his subjects a reciprocal bond to trust in 'the word of a king'.[69] The failure of that trust more than anything else was incomprehensible to him. Still in 1642, he snapped at the earl of Holland, saying 'it was a high thing to tax a king with breach of promises'.[70] And even in treating with rebels, he could not entirely condone a breach of his word. Following James's own counsel that in dealing with rebels, though 'direct promises' should still not be made, it was legitimate to gain time by 'fair general speeches', he instructed the marquis of Hamilton, his commissioner to the rebel Covenanters in 1638, 'in a word gain time by all the *honest means* you can'.[71] 'Flatter them with hopes', he continued, so long as 'you engage not me against my grounds.'[72] The sanctity of oaths, Charles continued to maintain throughout the 1640s, overrode political expediency and hard circumstance. He evidently approved of the rather Hobbesian view that even an oath made to a thief was made voluntarily and was binding – not least because an oath was to God as well as man.[73] Accordingly he ordered the future Charles II that, though his restoration might be on hard conditions, 'whatever you promise, keep'.[74] Despite his own hard conditions, Charles told Alexander Henderson during the debate on the church at Newcastle, it was not least his coronation oaths that bound him to sustain the bishops.[75] The sanctity of oaths was essential to the very existence of a Christian commonwealth.

Beyond the obligation to fulfil his promises, James, in happier times, had instructed a future king to eschew any public rhetoric that did not voice his innermost thoughts, urging 'his tongue should ever be the true messenger of his heart'.[76] The denial of a distinction between the 'public' and 'private' voices of a ruler was, I have argued, itself a rejection of the Machiavellian notion of a distinct sphere of 'politics' and the reaffirmation of the harmony of virtue and

[66] C. Petrie, ed., *The letters, speeches and proclamations of King Charles I* (London, 1935), p. 51.

[67] Bray, *Memoirs of Evelyn*, p. 5.

[68] *Works of Charles I*, I, 376.

[69] *Cobbett's parliamentary history of England*, III, 293; cf. James I's insistence that when he spoke the word of a king 'you are bound to believe me', McIlwain, ed., *Political works of James I*, p. 317.

[70] *Works of Charles I*, I, 397.

[71] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 182; Petrie, ed., *Letters, speeches and proclamations of Charles I*, p. 7.

[72] Ibid. p. 106.

[73] R. Sanderson, *De juramento: seven lectures concerning the obligation of promisory oaths* 'revised and approved under his Majesty's own hand' (1655), pp. 138–9.

[74] Petrie, ed., *Letters, speeches and proclamations of Charles I*, p. 240.

[75] *Works of Charles I*, I, 325.

[76] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 182, 280; McIlwain, ed., *Political works of James I*, pp. 280, 307.

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government.[77] If Charles learned this from his father, he also read that scripture condemned feigning and enjoined a singleness of heart. It was, he believed, the Jesuits' and puritans' mental reservations to their oaths and promises, the gap between language and intention, that more than anything made them a threat to a commonwealth of discourse into which 'a sense mixed of verbal and mental parts is no wise to be admitted'.[78] For a mental reservation implied an individual conscience separate from and at odds with the values and truths which, it was still believed, were shared across the commonwealth. Like his father, therefore, Charles often expressed his desire 'that the clearness and candour of his royal heart may appear to all his subjects'.[79] This was more than a mere claim to sincerity or a plea for trust; it was an invocation to his subjects to be instructed in what was right by looking into the king's conscience. 'We will not be drawn to pretend', he explained to the Commons during the debate on the Petition of Right, when 'our judgement and conscience are not satisfied'. The king's conscience was not the servant of any private interest; it was the custodian of 'the public good and safety of us and our people', a conscience for the commonwealth.[80] Because he would 'not affirm that to men what in my conscience I denied to God',[81] the king, as his father had counselled, would act as a crystal through which his subjects would see and come to join with him in knowledge of God and of his decrees for a Christian society.

Charles adhered to the concept of a shared national conscience, even as the realm fragmented and divided into civil war. Like the law, conscience was a shared code for conduct across the commonwealth. The judges, the custodians of the common laws, he explained, he had left 'wholly to their consciences and whensoever they offended against that they wronged his Majesty no less than his people'.[82] And yet, he also accepted, necessarily, the fact of individual beliefs, arguing – in significant language – that 'every private believer is a king and a priest'.[83] Like James in his treatment of his catholic subjects, Charles endeavoured to maintain that 'different professions in point of religion cannot... take away the community of relations either to parents or to princes'.[84] However if God was 'the only king of men's consciences', those who did not share the king's religion would not, in the end, follow his conscience – or continue their allegiance.[85] In the end, in the absence of an ecumenical reunion of Christendom or a readiness to tolerate difference of belief and to separate conscience and politics, Charles was left denouncing those who challenged the codes of the commonwealth as misled by false conscience, or by none. The malignant, he replied to the parliamentary petition of 1641, threatened the common peace under '*pretence* of religion and conscience'.[86] The lecturers appointed by puritan patrons, he told '*all* his loving subjects' in

[77] See Sharpe, 'Private conscience and public duty'.
[78] Sanderson, *De juramento*, pp. 198, 202.
[79] *Cobbett's parliamentary history*, II, 573.
[80] Ibid. II, 352.
[81] *Eikon Basilike* (London, 1876), pp. 21–2.
[82] *Works of Charles I*, II, 334.
[83] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 175.
[84] Ibid. p. 106.
[85] Ibid. p. 109.
[86] *Works of Charles I*, II, 77.

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August 1642, were men of '*no conscience*'; the private interests and vices of 'ambition, malice and sedition' had 'been hid under the visors of conscience and religion', for 'under the colours of piety ambitious policies march'.[87] As true religion sustained the cooperation and hierarchy of the commonwealth, self-interest and rebellion could only be 'the pretensions of religion in which politicians wrap up their designs'.[88] Moreover, Charles appears to have held to the conviction that, so powerful was the force of God's code, the pretenders knew in their hearts the nature of their deception – of themselves as well as others. Those, he proclaimed in his declaration from York in June 1642, who accused others 'themselves in their consciences know that the greatest and indeed only danger... is in their own desperate and seditious designs'.[89] 'Few men's consciences', he once opined, 'are so stupid as not to inflict upon them some secret impressions of that shame and dishonour which attends all unworthy actions'; 'even dishonest men are so far touched with some conscience'.[90] The king's role was to expose the pretenders, to develop the residual sense of right and wrong in all, and to protect and defend the common conscience of the realm until the misguided came to see the light or were defeated and saw God's own displeasure.

Charles had hopes of all three. From the publication of his majesty's *Large declaration* in 1639, Charles set out to expose the pretence of conscience claimed as justification for their actions by enemies to episcopacy.[91] He was optimistic, he recalled by way of answer to the Nineteen Propositions, that even during the Long Parliament those who had combined to alter this government 'would... have been converted in their consciences by the clearness and justice of our actions'.[92] And at the very end, he believed that those who voted to block all further treating with him, knew in their consciences that he had 'satisfied your desires in every particular since this treaty'.[93] Sinners, however, resisted the injunctions of conscience (even when it dimly still spoke to them) to do their duty. The king could never be deaf to its call. 'If you', he had warned his MPs as early as 1628, '... should not do your duties... I must in discharge of my conscience, use those other means which God hath put into my hands to save that which the follies of some particular men may otherwise hazard to lose.'[94] The king, in other words, to provide what 'the state... needs', had to reinforce God's voice of conscience in his subjects – by example and persuasion, and ultimately, if need be, by authority and force.

It was a familiar political analogue in early modern England to characterize the king as the reason of the body politic. As the court masques evidence, Charles represented his authority as the rule of reason over passions and appetites. When, however, at Holdenby, he referred to 'the Reason which God hath given him to judge by for the good of him and his people', we can see that

[87] Ibid. II, 149, 159. [88] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 88. [89] *Works of Charles I*, II, 107.
[90] *De juramento*, p. 205; *Effata regalia*, p. 88.
[91] See [W. Balcanquall], *A large declaration concerning the late tumults in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1639).
[92] *Works of Charles I*, II, 136. [93] Ibid. I, 293.
[94] *Cobbett's parliamentary history*, II, 218.

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what Charles means by that reason was a special judgement and capacity to discern God's will, in other words a right 'conscience'.[95] If it was the king's duty, as he believed, to put 'the salvation of men's souls above the preservation of their bodies and states', so God had equipped him to perform it.[96] The conscience, Charles told Alexander Henderson, was God's 'vicegerent'; and as God's vicegerent on earth, the king's duty was to be the conscience of his people.[97] So in 1625, in a public prayer of Charles's own devising, the people of England were taught to pray: 'rule the heart of thy chosen servant Charles, our king and governor, that he knowing whose minister he is may above all things seek thy honour and glory and that we his subjects duly considering whose authority he hath may faithfully serve, honour and humbly obey him, in thee and for thee'.[98] The king's conscience then was never in theory at odds with his practice of government; it was the essence of his kingship. 'To look to my own conscience', Charles put it, was 'the faithful discharge of my trust as a king.'[99] Those who advised Charles to compromise his conscience on certain matters so as to preserve his throne sought to separate what he saw as inviolably married: his conscience and his regality. The king who had condemned the Jesuits' and puritans' mental reservations would not conceal his own knowledge of God's wishes: 'I have never', he told the Speaker of the house of commons in 1647, 'dissembled nor hid my conscience'.[100] To dissemble it was to be unkinged:

> A quiet conscience in the breast
> Has only peace, only rest
> The wisest and worst of kings
> Are out of tune unless she sings.[101]

The compromise of the royal conscience, Charles believed, signalled the surrender to appetite and the breakdown of all social relations. 'If I should forsake my conscience', he writes in anguish to his beloved wife, 'I cannot be true to... thee.'[102] In compromising his conscience, the king surrendered along with his regality, his trust, his honour, his very humanity. Matters of conscience could not be negotiated or treated, because the conscience was 'more dear' than life. As a consequence, Charles Stuart concluded it was 'better for me to die enjoying this empire of my soul, which subjects me only to God, so far as by reason or religion He directs me, than live with the title of a king, if it should carry such a vassalage with it as not to suffer me to use my reason and conscience,... as a king...'.[103]

'The dictates of conscience', Bishop Sanderson wrote in a work that Charles I himself revised, '*whether right or erroneous* ever bindeth at the least not to act against it.'[104] The trust placed in kings, however, necessitated that their

[95] *Works of Charles I*, II, 616. [96] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 86. [97] *Works of Charles I*, I, 174.
[98] *A form of common prayer together with an order of fasting* (1625), sig. I2.
[99] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 78. [100] *Works of Charles I*, I, 243.
[101] M. Pickel, *Charles I as patron of poetry and drama* (London, 1936), pp. 177–8, a poem ascribed to Charles I. [102] J. Bruce, ed., *Charles I in 1646*, p. 71. [103] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 29.
[104] *De juramento*, p. 84.

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consciences should not err. James therefore had advised his son to take the reckoning with his conscience daily: 'remember every once in four and twenty hours, in the night or when you are at greatest quiet to call yourself to account of all your last days actions... censure yourself as sharply as if you were your own enemy.'[105] Charles therefore resolved that, as vital to 'the conscientious execution of that regal office whereto He hath called me...', 'with a strict and impartial scrutiny will I examine my heart'.[106] It was for the king, he told the Commons, to take their counsel but to weigh it with 'the reason, which have prevailed with our own conscience', that is after conversing alone with 'that mighty Counsellor who can both suggest what is best and incline his heart steadfastly to follow it'.[107] James, we have seen, commended confession to his son and meditated on scripture always as the best tutor to and mirror of a king's conscience. Charles regularly confessed his sins, indeed retained a confessor, and in addition evidently took his most difficult cases of conscience to his trusted clergy – to Archbishop Laud and to Bishop Juxon.[108] Moreover, like his father, he meditated alone on passages of scripture, finding special comfort in the Psalms, which his father had translated and which he 'would usually upon occasion repeat... by heart' after meditation.[109] 'God's sovereignty', he knew, was 'the... King of men's consciences', and of none more especially than the king's own. 'When a King retires to God', he once uttered, 'he most enjoys himself', his own being, as monarch and man.[110] There can be no denying Charles's performance of that 'strict... scrutiny' of self he proclaimed nor doubting what Richard Watson was to call his 'self-clearing and sometimes... self-condemning disposition of conscience'.[111]

When James VI described his *Basilikon Doron* as a 'discharge of our conscience', he meant it in (at least) two senses. The work was a dialogue with God, a mirror for himself and an instruction to his son(s) – and beyond to all other readers. Similarly, I have suggested, his meditations on the books of Revelations and Chronicles and St Matthew's gospel were private conversations with God that he published because they were mediations of God, so fulfilling a king's duty to bring his subjects to knowledge and fear of the Lord.[112] Charles did not follow his father's course in writing on books of scripture. Though learned in the scriptures and Fathers, he was less of a theologian than James; his character, perhaps too his faith, were less logocentric than his father's. But in his own ways, Charles was as concerned to communicate to his subjects his conscience and knowledge of God – through icons and texts – finally through his death making himself both icon and text, apostle and martyr of Christ.

Few scholars have paid any attention to the prayers Charles composed or published under his name. Prayer, Charles was to define as the

[105] *Basilikon Doron*, I, 44.
[106] *The princely pelican*, p. 9.
[107] *Effata regalia*, p. 38; Petrie, *Letters, speeches and proclamations of Charles I*, p. 120.
[108] Sharpe, *The personal rule of Charles I*, p. 281.
[109] *Princely pelican*, p. 10.
[110] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 109; *Effata regalia*, p. 92.
[111] *Effata regalia*, epistle dedicatory.
[112] Sharpe, 'Private conscience and public duty', pp. 92–5.

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'soul's ... immediate converse with the divine majesty', 'thoughts devoted and dedicated to God ... when the mind is most at quiet'.[113] As we read them, we cannot doubt that for Charles prayers were what his father's biblical exegeses had been for James: a meditation on, a personalizing of scripture – and a baring of the conscience before God. Where James grappled in his study with the hermeneutics of Holy Writ to discern God's will, Charles's less intellectual piety led him to kneel in prayers of emotional self-subjugation. The prayers have a confessional tone: 'look down at me' he prayed, 'thy unworthy servant who has prostrated myself at the footstool of thy throne of Grace'.[114] Acknowledging his failure to do all the duties of a Christian, the king yet fulfilled 'our burden and necessary duty to confess our sins freely unto thee'.[115] These intensely personal devotions, however, were not private. From the very beginning of his reign to his death, Charles also sought to lead his people through prayer to a knowledge of and subjection to the divine will. The plague that afflicted the land in the very year of his succession starkly underlined the need for prayers of atonement and the monarch's duty to take, as it were, the confession of the nation. Charles therefore, with the assistance of his bishops, composed a prayer and service, which, a proclamation of 3 July enjoined, should be

generally observed and solemnized ... that when both prince and people together through the whole land shall join in one common and solemn devotion, of sending up their faithful and repentant prayers to Almighty God at one instant of time, the same shall be more available to obtain that mercy, help and comforting from God.[116]

The service reminded subjects that, as a mark of God's wrath, plague signalled the need for national repentance and fasting – ends 'to a more deep consideration of their consciences'.[117] His people felled by pestilence, the biblical King David had asked God to spare them, 'and rather to turn his ire himward ...'; the like had Josaphat and Ezechias. So Charles subjected himself – 'I am poor and in misery' – and by his example taught the humiliation his people, 'miserable and wretched sinners as we are', owed to God.[118] The 1625 prayers and service he devised were a form of national confession and purgation. 'Our conscience', (we note the singular noun), all prayed, 'doth accuse us and our sins do reprove us': 'if we should excuse ourselves our own consciences would accuse us before thee.' Prayer united the realm: all prayed for the king to serve God and for themselves and all subjects to 'humbly obey him in thee and for thee'. All confessed the nation's vices: drink and gluttony, fornication and swearing, false weights and measures, polluting the Lord's day, criticising authority – the last underlining how a virtuous king not only implored God's mercy for the realm but spoke as the voice of its collective conscience.

The second outbreak of plague in 1636 saw another service together with another proclamation for a weekly fast, both intended 'by serious humiliation

[113] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 113, *Princely pelican*, p. 19. [114] *Workes of Charles I*, section D IV.
[115] Ibid. I, 196. [116] Larkin, ed., *Stuart royal proclamations*, II, no. 19, pp. 46–8.
[117] *A form of prayer*, preface. [118] Ibid. sig. C3v and passim.

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to implore the grace and favour of that Supreme offended majesty who hath smitten the land'.[119] This time, with the plague severe and (to be) enduring, it was acknowledged dangerous to detain assemblies in infected places for long services. The prescribed public service was shorter, and 'all other duties of prayer and humiliation requisite' were left to 'be observed by every person in their private families, at home'.[120] However, though circumstance limited the practice, the principle of communal uniform public worship was reaffirmed. In places not infected, 'His majesty requireth that the said fast be publicly solemnized, not only by reading the said [new] book, but by the use of sermons, or homilies … and for the more orderly solemnizing thereof, without confusion, his majesty … hath directed that the book of Prayers formerly set forth … shall be reprinted …'. This the king 'commands to be used in all churches and places at these public meetings … as they tender the favour of Almighty God'.[121] Charles was directly connecting his authority to his own prayers, his kingship with a role as priest, overriding the false conscience of hypocrites (as he put it in thinly veiled denunciation of the puritans), to lead a national humiliation and worship.

In these volumes of prayers, the king's conscience virtually stands for the very being – or ideal – of the Christian commonwealth. Indeed, like James's paraphrases of scripture, Charles's effort to cohere and articulate a national conscience can be read as an attempt to resist the challenges to that ideal and to revalidate both the organic concept of the state and the authority of God's lieutenant to speak to him for it. After the outbreak of civil war, however, a war fought in part over religious differences and fears, the fiction of a common conscience was harder to sustain. Initially Charles endeavoured through prayers to uphold it, almost classifying civil war as another plague from outside. So his 1643 devotions led all in prayer 'for the averting of God's judgement now upon us; for the ceasing of this present rebellion; and restoring a happy peace in this kingdom'. Because all had too much followed their own hearts, and rebelled against the Lord, they prayed for obedience to him, the devotions closing with the homily against disobedience to all magistrates taken from the book published in Queen Elizabeth's reign.[122] But as division hardened, the king had to acknowledge that his conscience and prayers articulated those of a party rather than the whole commonwealth. Prayers were now of thanks for victory to a 'God of Hosts who goest forth with our Armies' and 'against them that strive with Him'. Though the king prayed the Lord to 'strike the minds of the perverse with a true touch of that conscience which they go about to stifle and a true sense of that duty to things anointed', the coupling (of conscience and obedience) was more artificial and the definition of conscience more partisan. Charles himself acknowledged it; he was banished from his garden of Eden, in which all men knew and obeyed God

[119] Larkin, ed., *Stuart royal proclamations*, II, no. 229, pp. 538–40; *A form of common prayer together with an order for fasting* (1636).
[120] Larkin, ed., *Stuart royal proclamations*, p. 539.
[121] Ibid. p. 540.
[122] *A form of common prayer to be used upon the solemn fast appointed by his majesty's proclamation* (1643).

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and king. Though he prayed for peace and concurrence, he knew that some 'do pursue their own private ends' and followed their *own* consciences.[123]

During the 1640s, amid the war of pamphlets and propaganda that was no less important than the conflict of arms, we hear Charles struggling with this dilemma. The king retained a strong belief in, and saw clearly the need for, a common conscience if the commonwealth were to be repaired. Yet others now claimed conscience to justify violence and sectarianism; and circumstances and even the king's friends urged the need for expedient courses to secure his victory over his enemies. As early as 1641 the earl of Strafford argued that by going to the scaffold he might act as a scapegoat and purge the nation's ills. Knowing the earl to be innocent, however, Charles could not 'satisfy myself in honour or conscience' without assuring him that he would not suffer.[124] 'I must tell you', the king informed the Lords, 'that in my conscience I cannot condemn him of high treason':

> My lords I hope you know what a tender thing conscience is; and I must declare unto you that to satisfy the people I would do great matters: but in this of conscience neither fear nor any other respect whatsoever shall make me go against it.[125]

After attainder and sentence, Charles could hardly bring himself to sign the earl's death warrant, for 'conscience draweth itself by its own light'.[126] The king's privy council, however, pressed on him the necessity that absolved him from guilt. Four prelates were sent to Charles to 'propound how the tenderness of his conscience might safely wade through this insuperable difficulty'. They argued that because high 'judges' had found Strafford guilty the king 'may suffer that judgement to stand though in his private mind he was not satisfied...'.[127] It was an argument that, in separating public from private belief, the conscience of the commonwealth from that of the king, undermined all Charles held dear as man and monarch.

Charles repented his concurrence in Strafford's death right up to his own last day. And not merely because he had let down a friend. Of the courses open to him in 1641, he had chosen 'rather what was safe than what seemed just, preferring the outward peace of my kingdoms with men before that inward exactness of conscience before God'. 'O never', the king prays in the *Eikon Basilike*, 'suffer me for reason of state to go against my reason of conscience.'[128]

Strafford's death, however, was by no means the only occasion on which the king faced a dilemma of conscience. Throughout the 1640s, negotiations for peace centred on religious issues and especially the episcopal government of the church. In 1641, the year in which he suspended many of his beliefs in the name of settlement, Charles conceded the taking away of bishops' votes in parliament, in the hope of abating the hostility to the episcopate itself. As the assault on them escalated, he came to repent an expedient act for which 'I have

[123] *A collection of prayers and thanksgivings used in his majesty's chapel and his armies* (1643); *A form of common prayer for blessing on the treaty now begun* (1644).

[124] Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 327.

[125] *Works of Charles I*, I, 387–8.

[126] J. Hacket, *Scrinia reserata: A memorial offer'd to the great deservings of John Williams* (1693), p. 160.

[127] Ibid. pp. 160–1.

[128] *Eikon Basilike*, pp. 6, 10.

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been most justly punished'.[129] But the issue would not fade away, and Charles's belief in the divinity of episcopal government had to be weighed in the scales with his duty to mend the rent in the commonwealth. In 1646 the prospect of peace hung on the bishops and Charles consulted Archbishop Juxon, knowing his worth 'in resolving cases of conscience'. Some, Charles told Juxon, persuaded him to presbyterianism which was 'against my conscience'; but he could not ignore his obligation to effect a peace. Could he, therefore, he asked, offer a temporary compliance, conceding presbyterian government for three years?[130] Though Juxon evidently answered in the affirmative, the concession was still too much for Charles's comfort. In February 1646 he had expressed his belief that a temporary concession 'may palliate not excuse my sin'.[131] We hear him endeavouring to convince himself that he had not 'thereby any whit abandoned... the great and not to be foresaken argument of my conscience'. 'It is', he tried to persuade himself, 'but a temporary permission to continue such an unlawful possession which for the present I cannot help, so as to lay a hopeful ground for a perfect recovery of that which to abandon were directly against my conscience.'[132]

During 1646 and 1647 Charles not only negotiated with Scots and with English presbyterians and independents, he negotiated between his desire for peace, which required compromise, and his conscience, which held him to rigid principles. Though he could justify deceiving the commissioners of an illegal parliament (as he saw it), he tried to stop short of outright deception by forms of words. Though he gave parliament 'leave to hope for more than he intended', he comforted himself that he had promised only to 'endeavour' their satisfaction.[133] Such linguistic sleights, however, appeared to many as duplicitous. The capture of royal letters after the battle of Naseby had revealed the gap between Charles's public protestations and secret thoughts and intentions; and, not least because of his stand on his honesty, greatly damaged his cause.[134] Though a sizeable peace party in the house of commons remained willing to trust the king, evidence of his deceit and evasiveness undoubtedly fed a party – in parliament and more dangerously in the army – that came to regard his oath as a lie and his person as an obstacle to peaceful settlement, a man of blood.[135] Throughout all the negotiations, Charles was probably trying to pursue constant goals through changing means dictated by altered circumstances. But if he lost more than he gained by such politicking, it would also appear that the king was himself discomfited by it and in his heart knew that it was best to adhere to principle 'howsoever it shall please God to dispose of me'.[136]

Certainly when it became clear that a stark choice had to be made about the

[129] *Works of Charles, I*, I, 196. [130] Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 422.
[131] Bruce, *Charles I in 1646*, p. 19. [132] Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 430, 434.
[133] Bruce, *Charles I in 1646*, p. xxvii.
[134] C. Carlton, *Charles I: the personal monarch* (London, 1983), p. 289; D. Underdown, *Pride's purge: politics in the puritan revolution* (Oxford, 1971), p. 60.
[135] Underdown, *Pride's purge*, p. 60ff and passim; P. Crawford, 'Charles Stuart, that man of blood', *Journal of British Studies*, XVI (1973), 41–61. [136] Bruce, *Charles I in 1646*, p. xvii.

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nature of the church, he took a stand even against his own beloved wife. Henrietta Maria had no doubt that her husband should ditch the bishops. Their quarrel over the matter, conducted through correspondence, was the most painful disjuncture between private affection and public duty in Charles's life, and the most powerful document of his conscience. Charles tried to explain to his wife why he rejected her counsel; he pleaded for her respect in this, one of their few clashes: 'albeit we differ in matters of religion, yet thou must esteem me for having care of my conscience.'[137] Finally in a moving sentence, he asked her to 'consider that if I should quit my conscience how unworthy I make myself of thy love'.[138] After periods of hesitation Charles came to assert what he had always known, that his conscience was his very being as a Christian; that to compromise it was to show 'more fear of man than of God'.[139]

Indeed by 1646 Charles had already come to believe in the necessity of a stand on conscience, even if it cost him his life. That is, he attempted to appropriate to himself and his cause the validation of conscience, to marginalize his enemies by denying their claim to it, and most of all to reunite the realm by publicly renouncing personal interest so as to speak once again as the conscience of the commonwealth. Some of Charles's thinking on the issue is undoubtedly reflected in Bishop Robert Sanderson's lectures on the obligation of promissory oaths, the work 'revised and approved under his Majesty's own hand'. Scripture, the lectures affirm, enjoined singleness of heart: the obligation to mean what one says. Promises were made always to God as well as men and so 'no injury done to us by men can give us just cause to injure God'. Because 'the obligation of an oath is of divine natural law', 'the dictates of conscience... ever bindeth at the least not to act against it'. The Christian, Sanderson's treatise concludes, should not prefer external peace to the quiet of his conscience.[140]

Increasingly, as military was followed by political defeat, this was the stance of Charles's public pronouncements. In his reply in May 1647 from imprisonment at Holdenby to proposals from parliament, the king coupled his divine right, authority and conscience: 'without disclaiming that Reason which God hath given him to judge by for the good of Him and His people, and without putting the greatest violence upon his own conscience', Charles argued, he could not 'give his consent to all of them'.[141] In September he similarly wrote from Hampton Court that he could not consent to new terms 'without violation of his conscience...'.[142] The next year, in his stand for episcopacy, Charles hinted that he would die to preserve his conscience and to enshrine the principles of conscience as the basis of action in a Christian commonwealth:

> if his own Houses shall not think fit to recede from the strictness of their demands in these particulars, his Majesty can with more comfort cast himself upon his Saviour's goodness to support him and defend him from all affliction, how great soever that may befall him, than for any politic consideration... deprive himself of... inward tranquillity.[143]

[137] Ibid. p. 24; cf. p. 7. [138] Ibid. p. 21. [139] *Eikon Basilike*, p. 6.
[140] Sanderson, *De juramento*, pp. 41–2, 84, 197, 234, 236 and passim.
[141] *Works of Charles I*, II, 616. [142] Ibid. II, 629. [143] Ibid. I, 349.

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Finally at his trial, Charles eschewed political engagement and refused to answer charges but 'delivered my conscience', a conscience which 'I call dearer to me than my life'.[144] During the last weeks of his life, far from concurring with John Reeve and Conrad Russell that he should have been more politically astute, Charles was anxious to erase from the public memory the occasions on which he had played the politician; indeed to confess his own lapse from fidelity to conscience as the cause of his troubles. In a prayer he was alleged to have composed in his 'life of sufferings', the king asked God's (and his people's) forgiveness for having made concessions – to the Scots and over the rights of bishops: 'with shame and grief I confess that I therein followed the persuasion of worldly wisdom forsaking the dictates of a right informed conscience.'[145] Charles prayed: 'keep me from the great offence of enacting anything against my conscience.'[146] By his final stand and confession of his recent 'errors' – errors of negotiating, politicking, conceding – Charles cast all recent events as plagues brought on the nation, like those of the 1620s and 1630s, by its *and his* sins. And his personal confession and reaffirmation of faith was an invitation to his people to follow him, to go with their conscience.[147] For, as an editor of the king's works glossed the royal message, 'a good conscience... draweth away all sadness... And it is that which I wish unto all who fear God and honour the King...'.[148] By mediating God's will to his people, the king's conscience might lead his subjects back to God – and so in the future to his lieutenant on earth.

In order to do so, either Charles or his intimates constructed a powerful text of the royal conscience that might live after him, and invalidate the rival claims to interpret God's will made by the godly. The *Eikon Basilike* more than anything else denied the victory to Charles's enemies by elevating the sphere of conscience above that of state.[149] The text opens with a repeated royal confession of his sin in sending Strafford to the block:

> I have often with sorrow confessed both to God and men as an act of so sinful frailty that it discovered more fear of men than of God. I see it a bad exchange to wound a man's own conscience thereby to salve state sores.[150]

Having learned his error, however, Charles announced how he thereafter determined to live by his conscience and 'although I may seem a less politician to men yet I need no several distinctions or evasions before God'.[151] And what he hid not from God he concealed not from men either. Where his enemies hid their real intent behind 'disguises', 'pretensions', and in 'deceitful dalliances',

[144] Ibid. I, 442, 455.

[145] *His majesty's prayers which he used in his time of his sufferings* (1649, E 1317 (2)), sig A4v.

[146] E.R., *The divine meditations and vows of his sacred majesty in his solitude at Holmby House* (1649, E560 27), p. 7.

[147] e.g. Halliwell, *Letters of kings of England*, II, 361, 430, 432; *Works of Charles I*, I, 196; Hargrave, *A complete collection of state trials*, p. 1043; *Eikon Basilike*, pp. 6–10, 225–6.

[148] E.R., *Divine meditations of his majesty*, preface to the reader.

[149] See *Eikon Basilike*, p. 144, where Charles says of his enemies: 'They have often indeed had the better against my side in the field, but never, I believe, at the bar of God's tribunal, or their own consciences.'

[150] Ibid. p. 6.

[151] Ibid. p. 25.

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the king acted only from conscience assured, now he was true to him, of God's favour and protection.[152]

Acting on his conscience was also more than a personal satisfaction; it was, the *Eikon* puts it, 'the faithful discharge of my trust as a king'. For it was the duty of a king to consider 'the salvation of men's souls above the preservation of their bodies and estates' and so to make their sins appear to their consciences as the king's had to him.[153] God was the 'king of men's consciences' and it was the duty of his lieutenant to teach it. But, in learning subjection to God, subjects came to an understanding of their bond of obedience to the godly king, 'bonds which thy word... have laid on their conscience'. For those who sinned against the king's conscience sinned also 'against thee'.[154] It was those who rejected conscience who elevated power above the law, hid sedition under the cloak of religion and ultimately surrendered their own natural freedom, the 'empire' of their own souls. For God saw through their disguises and worked to 'accuse them in their own thoughts'. Their 'black veils' could not hide the king's 'shining face while God give me a heart... to converse with him'.[155]

It is as a text of the royal conscience that the *Eikon Basilike* turned the tables on the king's enemies. Obviously the king's stance as *the* interpreter of God's will undercut the whole godly justification of their actions in the name of conscience. But the potential force of this text goes well beyond that. Just as he had in his prayers of the 1620s, Charles in the pages of the *Eikon* conducts a national service of worship and atonement. Once we read in it, we, willy nilly, participate in that service and acknowledge the king's sacerdotal role. Or we cast ourselves outside, as one excommunicated from the church. Indeed, Charles's appropriation of the language and role of Christ made rejection of the earthly simultaneously a turning away from the heavenly king. The king's conscience in other words has become the text of God's will, rendering all other claims to conscience not only rebellious or flawed, but ungodly.

Milton discerned both the power of this stance and the urgent need for the puritans to contest it. The *Eikon*, he confessed, read as though 'the very manuscript of God's judgement had been delivered to [Charles's] custody and exposition'.[156] In order to undermine it, therefore, he both denied the authenticity of the king's own conscience and refuted any claim for monarchical conscience to dictate to others. Strafford's trial, Milton argued, demonstrated the errors of Charles's conscience in its opposition to a 'solemn piece of Justice' and the 'welfare, the safety, and... the unanimous demand of three populous Nations....'[157] If the king claimed conscientious scruples about Wentworth's execution, he continued, it was only 'because he knew himself a Principal in what the *Earl* was but his accessory...'.[158] Charles's vacillations over Strafford's condemnation – his insistent refusal to find him guilty, his subsequent acquiescence and then passionate regret – Milton used as evidence of the king's

[152] Ibid. pp. 26, 88. [153] Ibid. pp. 78, 86. [154] Ibid. p. 98.

[155] Ibid. pp, 111, 144.

[156] J. Milton, *Eikonoklastes*, ed. W. H. Haller in *The works of John Milton*, v (New York, 1932), 272. [157] Ibid. p. 91. [158] Ibid. p. 93.

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'subtle dissimulation', of his worldly political manoeuvres masked by a rhetoric of conscience which was (the very charge Charles had levelled at his enemies) a 'specious plea'.[159] Even had the royal conscience not been corrupted, Milton denies its authority over others. In answer to Charles's poignant laments about the assault on his conscience, Milton replies that the grant to the king of his own conscience should not be a 'permitting him to bereave us of ours'.[160] Charles I, Milton implies, not altogether inaccurately, deployed the authority of his conscience as a prop to the exercise of absolute government. 'It was not the inward use of his reason and of his conscience that would content him, but to use them both as a law over all his subjects.'[161] Against Charles's claim to have 'his conscience... a universal conscience, the whole Kingdom's conscience',[162] Milton asserted the rights of subjects in their own, and indeed the role of parliaments in protecting those rights of conscience, as they did the property of subjects, from incursion. 'The parliament... hath had it always in their power to limit and confine the exorbitancy of kings, whether they call it their will, their reason, or their conscience.'[163] For no monarch, Milton concluded, could 'counterfeit the hand of God': 'he who... takes upon him perpetually to unfold the secret and unsearchable Mysteries of high Providence is likely... to mistake and slander them.'[164] The claim to die for conscience, *Eikonoklastes* asserts against the very core of the *Eikon Basilike*, does not make Charles I a martyr, if it is the unconstitutional claim to power of an erroneous or specious conscience.

The vast pamphlet war sparked off by the *Eikon Basilike* essentially revolved around this issue: the claims made for and the integrity of the royal conscience.[165] *The princely pelican*, a work of observations extracted from his majesty's divine meditations, reports the king saying: 'As for princely policy, I hold none better than sincere piety.'[166] Accordingly he promises that 'with a strict and impartial scrutiny will I examine my heart'.[167] *The princely pelican* represents the lone godly prince in the wilderness of sin, finding comfort in the psalms. Against the charge that the royal meditations were deceit or hypocrisy, the author retorts that 'his princely pen hated nothing more than to play the subtle sophist with their soul'.[168] The contest, charge and countercharge went on. A 1661 edition of the *Aphorisms Divine Moral* [*and*] *Politick of Charles I* announced their primary value as texts of the king's 'self-clearing and sometimes... self-condemning disposition of conscience'.[169]

But the king's opponents did not simply negate the claims of the *Eikon Basilike* and its defenders. Milton's reference to providence reminds us that, albeit in different language, others besides Charles I made claim to discern God's ways and will in the world. For the puritan, the ability to discern God's providence

[159] Ibid. p. 138. [160] Ibid. p. 132. [161] Ibid. p. 132. [162] Ibid. pp. 176–7.
[163] Ibid. p. 181. [164] Ibid. p. 272.
[165] For a brilliant discussion of *Eikonoklastes* see S. Zwicker, *Lines of authority: politics and English literary culture* (Ithaca, 1993), ch. 2.
[166] *The princely pelican's royal resolves presented in sundry choice observations...* (1649), p. 5.
[167] Ibid. p. 9. [168] Ibid. pp. 10, 23. [169] *Effata regalia*, epistle dedicatory.

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was a mark of election, a prerogative of the saints. Though such a belief was common throughout the early modern period, Blair Worden is surely right to observe that it was the time of the Great Rebellion or Civil War in England 'when Puritan providentialism enjoys its most widespread influence'.[170] During the civil wars, events – revolutionary events – required a justification that the discourse of law and politics did not readily provide. The doctrine of providence offered the most powerful counter to the pretensions to divine right by an unelect king (as he was seen) and appropriated God's will and intervention to override arguments from law, custom and tradition. Monarchy might be limited by arguments from custom and law, but it was the discourse of providence that gave a script to regicides. Moreover, providence not only made sense of these apparently confused and turbulent years; it was a concept and langauge which, far from dictating rigid courses and principles, permitted major shifts of policy and action, as God revealed his mysterious will at each turn of events. Oliver Cromwell, of course, not only illustrates these observations; he exemplifies, one is tempted to say epitomizes, them. Whatever his early uncertainties and doubts about the trial and execution of the king, God's providence overcame them. And if he on all matters often changed his mind, it was but because he came to know God's will the better.[171] The providence that contended with Charles I's claim to conscience was claimed ironically by the Lord Protector as *his* validation – for military decision, for political manoeuvre, for the acquisition of power, for the defence of his authority.

Whether or not Cromwell was always entirely sincere in his invocation of providence is a question we neither can, nor perhaps need to, answer. What is important is that – like Charles I's claim to conscience – it was contested. It is worth remembering, since it is an obvious point too often passed over, that, even in military defeat, the royalists themselves remained committed to the idea of providence and denied that their enemies enjoyed its aid or validation.[172] God may have chastened sinful cavaliers with defeat in battle, but it was only to raise them again in the future. The Cromwell who claimed providence they lampooned as an evil Machiavel who sought only to conceal his ambition and expediency.[173] Such charges were only to be expected from royalist sympathizers, but increasingly they also came to be levelled at the Protector from fellow puritans and comrades-in-arms for the Good Old Cause. As one of his querulous and unco-operative parliaments told Cromwell, 'the providences of God are like a two edged sword which may be used both ways' – or, more accurately, several ways.[174] The Ludlow, Vane and indeed Milton who had followed Cromwell's sense of the providential call to arms came to very different interpretations of God's script for a holy commonwealth.

[170] B. Worden, 'Providence and politics in Cromwellian England', *Past & Present*, CIX (1985), 55–99, 59. [171] Ibid. passim. [172] Worden, 'Providence', pp. 87–8.

[173] There is a vast contemporary pamphlet literature painting Cromwell as Machiavelli. See F.Raab, *The English face of Machiavelli* (London, 1964), ch. 5.

[174] Worden, 'Providence', p. 85.

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It is not surprising then that the doctrine of providence, as Blair Worden put it, 'lost its edge' during the 1650s nor, as I would add, that the parallel claim to be the conscience of the realm was blunted along with it.[175] Observation of others' shifts and manoeuvres encouraged cynicism about, and the charge of duplicity against, those who claimed to interpret God's will. And in the midst of civil war, changes of regime and successions of loyalty oaths 'even those who avoided open changes of allegiance were frequently forced to equivocate, to dissemble, and sometimes to swallow their principles'.[176] In such a world, it began to seem, in James Howell's graphic phrase, that conscience was all too 'apt to follow the conqueror' – to be at the mercy of whoever wielded power.[177] Against what he observed to be happening, Howell denied the autonomy of particular consciences and reasserted the need for conscience to take guidance from legitimate authority. From a rather different perspective Thomas Hobbes concurred. Listing the claim to individual conscience, along with the 'pretence of inspiration' (his sense of providence), as a doctrine 'repugnant to Civil Society', Hobbes both pressed the need for a 'public conscience' and located it in the secular text of the law rather than scripture.[178] The anarchy of the sects led others to distrust both scriptural politics and the appeal to individual conscience as forces of social instability.

Perhaps nothing more obstructed settlement during the 1650s than divisions over the authority of church and state, and the freedom of individual conscience. The gentry, some of whom had at least for a time been prepared to believe otherwise, articulated their fear that freedom for individual conscience signalled the dissolution of all society and government and pressed for a national church to act as the conscience of the realm. In 1660, it even appeared that they invited Charles II back to be what his father had claimed to be in the *Eikon*: the conscience of his people.

But, though long before it became obvious, it was not to be. For one, the new monarch's private faith was, almost certainly, not that of the church over which he presided as head. Moreover, Charles II seems genuinely not to have shared the belief of his propertied subjects that toleration of tender consciences was anathema to political stability. But more importantly, the world after 1660 had changed – for all the attempts to paper over the fact. The Civil War had schooled the realm in an art that since Machiavelli had first published most Englishmen had attempted to deny: the art of politics. And politics, though it took some time to acknowledge it, is a sphere of activity distinct from the realm of conscience.[179] The politics of Restoration England, it has been argued, was characterized by dissimulation and disguise, that very distance between the

[175] Ibid. p. 98.

[176] D. Woolf, 'Conscience, constancy and ambition in the career and writings of James Howell' in Morrill, Slack and Woolf, eds., *Public duty and private conscience*, pp. 243–78, quotation p. 243.

[177] Ibid. p. 268.

[178] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. R. Tuck (Cambridge, 1991), p. 223 and ch. 29 passim.

[179] Cf. M. McKeon, 'Politics of discourses and the rise of the aesthetic in seventeenth-century England', in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker, eds., *Politics of discourse* (Berkeley and London, 1987), pp. 35–51.

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heart and the tongue that James I and Charles I had denounced.[180] Even for monarchs, speaking to God and addressing their people involved different, at times contrary, discourses. The emergence of party vitiated a politics governed by the notion of a public conscience. The logic of such developments led, of course, to the Toleration Act. But it led too to a new attitude to conscience, not as a shared common code, but as an individual and autonomous entity from which men derived moral principles – that site or space which came to be called 'character'.[181] As John Locke put it, in his *Essay concerning human understanding* (*1690*), 'conscience is nothing else but our own opinion or judgement of the moral rectitude or gravity of our own actions'.[182]

It was a definition and concept far removed from that for the defence of which Charles I had given his life. By the end of the seventeenth century the king's claim to be the conscience of the commonweal had lost its force. Yet then, in changed circumstances, the consequence was not the dissolution of authority and society that Charles I and many of his contemporaries had feared. For though political authority had lost the validation that came from acting as the public conscience, toleration and what we might call the privatization of conscience[183] ended the threat of revolutionary providentialism. Both for rulers and rebels conscience was no longer the central discourse of the public sphere.

[180] S. Zwicker, *Politics and language in Dryden's poetry: the arts of disguise* (Princeton, 1984).

[181] For a brilliant discussion, see K. Thomas, 'Cases of conscience in seventeenth-century England' in Morrill, Slack and Woolf, eds., *Public duty and private conscience*, pp. 29–56. Keith Thomas's essay appeared after this essay was drafted but offers an excellent broader context for the shift I am arguing.

[182] O.E.D., 'Conscience'.

[183] Cf. T. Corns, *Uncloistered virtue: English political literature, 1640–60* (Oxford, 1992), p. 34.

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