

Bacon's "Serious Satire" of the Church and the "Golden
Mediocrity" of Induction

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It is as a reformer of natural philosophy rather than of the church that Francis Bacon is best known, and for good reason. From 1605 on he devoted the bulk of his published writings to the promotion of "the new philosophy." In the quasi-satiric *Advancement of Learning* (1605) he surveyed all knowledge to reveal how barren the old philosophy was and how much men did not know. Then in the *Novum Organum* (1620) he sought to replace the old philosophy in its two contemporary forms, the all-too-theoretical Scholasticism and the too randomly empirical alchemy, with the dynamic *via media* of empirical yet theoretical induction, a scientific method that would systematically increase human knowledge and render philosophy fruitful. Continuing to his death in 1626 to add to his plan of scientific reform, dubbed the *Instauratio Magna*, he succeeded in attracting a large and growing following, beginning with James I.

But prior to 1605 he had devoted himself largely to the reform of the Church of England. In two major treatises and a number of official papers and other works, all written from 1589 to 1604, and reflecting Elizabethan rather than Jacobean conditions, he satirized the chief opposing parties within the British church, the Puritans and the prelates, and proposed reforms by which they could be reconciled. The two treatises, which circulated in manuscript, received no official support from Elizabeth or James, and Bacon's proposed reform of the church proved as much of a failure as his reform of philosophy proved a success. When the treatises were finally published in 1640 and 1641, both church and state were on the brink not of reform but revolution.

The fame of Bacon's later writings has long cast his early religious writings in shadow. It was not until the 1930's, when it was argued that the Puritan ethos was the motive force behind England's scientific revolution,¹ that interest in Bacon's religious position within the Church of England was awakened. Although scholars aligned him with the Puritans, on the basis of his family and early political connections, what he actually wrote about the Puritans and their opponents was ignored. In the last few years, however, notable attention has been given to the first of the early treatises, *An Advertisement touching the Controversies of the Church of England*. Inspired, presumably, by Patrick Collinson's glowing allusions to this work, Julian Martin offered a secular political reading of it in 1992 (38-42) and Brian Vickers reprinted it with an elaborate historical introduction and notes in 1996.² But neither of these scholars has more than touched on the later and longer treatise, *Certain Considerations touching the better Pacification and Edification of the Church of England*, or Bacon's briefer statements on the Church of England which, together with the two treatises, form a coherent whole. It is the object of this study then to examine this whole, to show how Bacon sought in these neglected ecclesiastical works to solve the problem of the British church through satire and mediating reforms and, though he failed, how this failure ironically prepared the way for his successful promotion of the middle way of modern science.

Well before Bacon began his public career his family had taken a distinctive public stand on religion, upholding the established church though critical of prelatical power while favoring Puritan preaching. But if the 1584-85 letter of advice to Elizabeth doubtfully ascribed to Bacon by his Victorian editor is really his, it would represent a definitive rejection of the "preciseness" of Puritans like his mother and three elder half-brothers.³ A 1589-1590 letter written for his former tutor at Cambridge, Archbishop Whitgift, and more certainly attributed to Bacon is more conciliatory. It lists the ways "Reformers," as they at first reasonably "named themselves," had

transformed themselves in the course of time into a caricature, what “we commonly call Puritans” (*Works* 8.100). The fine line drawn in this letter between a reform movement originally capable of good within the church and rebellious Puritanism potentially threatening the state is more finely and fully presented in *An Advertisement Touching the Controversies of the Church of England*, written at about the same time.

Unlike the letter for Whitgift, there is no evidence that Bacon was commissioned to write this treatise and, instead of defending the archbishop’s or his family’s position, it criticizes the prelates no less than the Puritan preachers with an even-handedness that could not have pleased either side. It is not surprising, therefore, that the work was not printed until some fifty years later. Yet his object, Bacon says, is to heal the “wound” or “disease” that both sides together have caused in the church. He is confident that such a healing can occur because the differences do not concern matters “of the highest nature,” but only “ceremonies” and “extern policy” over which men may differ and still uphold the “true bonds of unity . . . ‘one faith, one baptism,’ and not one ceremony, one policy” (Vickers 1-2).

As to the prelates, blame for occasioning the controversies is placed squarely at their door. At first they considered the ceremonies rejected by the Puritans as “things indifferent” and acknowledged “many imperfections in the church,” while now they stand “precisely upon altering nothing.” Bacon’s application of the word “precisely” to the prelates makes them appear to be guilty of the same fault they ascribed so commonly to their opponents. Not only have the prelates become overly precise, but, upheld by the power of the state, they have enforced their precision by various means, especially by “easy silencing” of the preachers for minor verbal infractions, which, Bacon notes, “in such scarcity of preachers, . . . is to punish the people.” Still Bacon endorses episcopacy itself in the Church of England, since the church is already “settled and established,” but hints that only “if some abuses were taken away” in the episcopal government could English Protestantism match “the fruits of the churches abroad.” Overall, though, he supports a healthy diversity within Protestantism through which the Church of

England may “contend with other churches, as the vine with the olive, which of us beareth best fruit,” each fruit being acceptable (Vickers 10-14).

Bacon’s depiction of the negative side of Puritanism is even more vivid and detailed than his critique of the prelates. “The universities are the seat and continent of this disease,” he argues, because there professors who “seek an inward authority . . . over men’s minds” captivate “men of young years and superficial understanding” and inflame them with “private emulations and discontentments.” Under the aegis of “the simplicity of the Gospel,” Puritan preaching, fostered at the university, has become ignorant and anti-intellectual, not grounded on “sound conceits,” “little but generality,” interested only in “restraints and prohibitions,” and determining all to be “good and holy, by . . . what is more or less opposite to the institutions of the Church of Rome.” Furthermore, the preachers have become unbiblical by turning what the gospels call a “house of prayer” into a “house of preaching” and by appealing everything to the judgment of the people (Vickers 8-9, 16-17).

Bacon’s portrayal of the prelates as declining from leaders who accept diversity and criticism to petty martinets who employ political power to uphold the moral authority they lack and the Puritans as worthy reformers of admitted abuses who have declined into shallow demagogues running roughshod over the Bible, the authority they claim, could not have won him many friends on either side. The sharpness of the double attack is all the more remarkable because the *Advertisement* was occasioned by the vicious attack of each side upon the other in the Marprelate and Anti-Marprelate tracts, which Bacon condemned as serving “to turn religion into a comedy or satire; to search and rip up wounds with a laughing countenance; to intermix Scripture and scurrility sometime in one sentence” (Vickers 3). Bacon’s own double attack, if not scurrilous, is certainly in places quite satirical and offers fodder for the Elizabethan dramatists who were soon to create corrupt stage-prelates and hypocritical stage-Puritans for public entertainment.

Bacon acknowledged the similarity of what he was doing and what the tract-writers were doing by characterizing both as metaphorically “searching wounds,” but while the tract-writers ripped up wounds with a laughing countenance, he adopted a serious countenance and determined to open “what it is on either part, that keepeth the wound green,” only that the necessary “remedies be applied unto them” (Vickers 3). Such verbal “laying open of the distemper,” which might be considered satire, he later characterized as *Satira Seria*, “serious satire” (*Works* 1.730, 5.18). While the satirist of the Marprelate and Anti-Marprelate stamp sought “by wit to deride and traduce much of that which is good in professions,” a serious Christian satirist like himself sought “with judgment to discover and sever that which is corrupt” in a profession from that which is not (Vickers 253; cf. *Works* 5.17). What Bacon achieved in the *Advertisement*, as Patrick Collinson has said, is a “truly irenical critique,” a “remarkable *eienicon*,”⁴ and his hope was that by cauterizing the wound he would promote its healing.

Shortly after finishing the *Advertisement* Bacon wrote for his uncle, Lord Burghley, another treatise, *Certain Observations Made upon a Libel Published This Present Year, 1592*, which includes a section, titled in the margin, “Concerning the controversies in our church,” which reinforces points made in the *Advertisement* (*Works* 8.165). Between *Certain Observations* and James I’s accession in early 1603, Bacon wrote nothing concerning the controversies within the English church and until 1601 fairly little on public issues at all. This relative silence was no doubt a result of Bacon’s fall from royal favor in March of 1593 for opposing the subsidy proposed by Lord Burghley under direction from the queen. Bacon claimed in his speech in parliament against the subsidy that his opposition followed from an attempt “to search the wounds of the realm and not to skin them over” (*Works* 8.223), much as his views in the *Advertisement* followed from an attempt to search the wounds of the church. But Bacon’s serious satire on the realm was evidently even less

pleasing to the queen, who acknowledged no wounds in the state, than his serious satire of the church had probably been to prelates and Puritans.

Nonetheless, Bacon wrote several short but important works on non-public matters relevant to his religious and philosophical views just before and during his decade of royal disfavor. The first is a brief letter to Lord Burghley, written at about the same time he was writing the *Certain Observations* for him, which offers Bacon's earliest statement of his philosophical agenda. According to that letter, he intended first to "purge" philosophy of what he satirized as "two sorts of rovers," i.e., philosophical pirates, Scholasticism with its "frivolous disputations, confutations, and verboisities" and alchemy with its "blind experiments and auricular traditions." This purgation was then to be followed by a restoration of philosophy to health and fertility by means of what he later called induction but in the letter described only as "industrious observations, grounded conclusions, and profitable inventions and discoveries" (Vickers 20). Bacon then restated this agenda in a speech, "The Praise of Knowledge," from a dramatic work apparently written in 1592. Although the speech offers the hope that future knowledge shall not be "ever barren," it is chiefly devoted to satirizing the "knowledge which is now in use" in its two piratical versions (Vickers 34-36). In philosophy, as first in the church and then in the realm, Bacon sought to lay open the distemper with serious satire before applying the healing remedy.

In 1597 he brought out the first edition of his *Essays* and along with them a brief devotional collection in Latin, the *Meditationes Sacrae*. In one of the meditations from that collection he defends his practice of serious satire:

To a man of perverse and corrupt judgement all instruction or persuasion is fruitless and contemptible, which begins not with discovery, and laying open of the distemper and ill complexion of the mind which is to be recured, as a plaster is unseasonably applied before the wound be searched.

His previous writings had already revealed evidence of “perverse and corrupt judgement” in prelates and Puritans, Scholastics and alchemists, no less than in the queen, but since these were the authorities that one who “aspireth to . . . a fructifying and begetting goodness” must address, their “prejudicate opinion” must be met first and foremost by such wound-searching (Vickers 91).

When James I ascended the English throne in March of 1603, Bacon found himself, he says, “as one waked out of sleep” (*Works* 10.73) and immediately sought court employment. He bolstered his claims on the king by promptly addressing to him *A Brief Discourse touching the Happy Union of the Kingdoms* and followed it with a longer discourse on the unity of the church. This treatise, *Certain Considerations touching the better Pacification and Edification of the Church of England*, was apparently written before the Hampton Court Conference in January of 1604 and constitutes Bacon’s last and longest statement on the church. The printing of the work in 1604 was halted by order of Richard Bancroft, bishop of London, presumably because he considered it too Puritan (Vickers 501), and thus *Certain Considerations* was not published in full until 1640, the year the Long Parliament was seated and the year before Bacon’s earlier ecclesiastical treatise, the *Advertisement*, was first printed.

In its first few paragraphs Bacon implicitly links *Certain Considerations* to the *Advertisement* by saying the later work offers only “opinions . . . long held and embraced” (*Works* 10.103), and in many ways the two works complement each other. To the earlier work’s quite negative serious satire of both prelates and Puritan preachers the later work offers a quite positive and practical scheme of reform and remediation. Despite Bancroft’s response, Bacon claims in *Certain Considerations* the same “lack of partiality to either side” he had demonstrated in the *Advertisement* and advocates the mean or, as he calls it, “golden mediocrity.” To justify his claim he rejects two extremes: the prelatical view that “no reformation [is] to be admitted at all” and the Puritan view that “there should be but one form of discipline in

all churches, and that imposed by a necessity of a commandment and prescript out of the word of God" (*Works* 10.103-7; cf. 10.73). Thus the reforms to which he devotes the body of *Certain Considerations* are presented as a middle position that allows for change and diversity within the church.

In that body Bacon emphasizes that the changes he seeks are actually, in his view, restorations justified by Jesus' statement in Matthew 19.8, "in the beginning it was not so," which he quotes three times in Latin (*Works* 10.106, 110, 111). His "beginning" in this work is the "primitive Church," to which he frequently alludes (*Works* 10.106, 116, 117, 121), but that does not mean for him the church in Acts or in the "times of persecution, before temporal princes received the faith," but in "the better times," "the purest times of the first good Emperors that embraced the faith" (*Works* 10.108-9). Thus he accepts episcopacy but seeks to limit the bishops' power so that "in the greatest causes, and those which require a spiritual discerning," no bishop may decide alone and apart from "a presbytery or consistory," and no bishop may in matters of "spiritual science" act by deputy. Yet he also insists on a learned ministry, not just the preaching ministry favored by the Puritans. If these reforms were carried out, Bacon maintains, the church would be assured "a sweet and fruitful shower of many blessings" in this "spring of kingdoms" under James's rule (*Works* 10.103, 106, 110, 113, 118-21).

The reforms proposed in *Certain Considerations*, which include the elimination of the word "priest" in the liturgy, of the general absolution and confirmation, of private baptism by women or laymen, of the ring in marriage, of the oath *ex officio*, and of the requirement of cap and surplice (*Works* 10.114-21), are quite similar to those in the Millenary Petition delivered to James I by Puritan ministers in April 1603. All of Bacon's reforms are also found in the petition, except the call for the education of the clergy and, surprisingly, for limitation of episcopal power. The Millenary Petition also advocates a number of reforms not mentioned by Bacon. More significantly, the

rhetoric of the Petition and some of its proposed reforms have, unlike Bacon's, a decidedly "Puritanical" tone. The petitioners depict themselves as "groaning, as under a common burden of Human Rites and Ceremonies," and as "suspended, silenced, disgraced, imprisoned for men's traditions." They ask that "no Popish Opinion . . . be any more taught" and "divers Popish canons . . . be reversed," and they insist that "the Lord's day be not profaned" but the "Rest upon Holy-days [be] not so strictly urged."⁵ Unlike Bacon they make no claim of even-handed impartiality, nor learnedly look back to the early church, nor forward to the fructifying and begetting goodness of a Jacobean spring.

What the contrast between *Certain Considerations* and the Millenary Petition shows is that while virtually all of Bacon's proposed reforms would have been greeted with applause by the Puritans, Bacon was not a Puritan advocating innovation, but a reformer who sought restoration to a healing position as far from the Puritan extreme as from the prelatical one, both of which together were distempering the church. In portraying himself in this way, he sums up in *Certain Considerations* the major directions of his previous writings. Having drawn a line between himself and the "preciser sort" first in the letter to Elizabeth, if that is his, he maintained this line, while also showing sympathy for the Puritans' earliest positions in the letter for Whitgift and the *Advertisement*, and in the *Advertisement* and *Certain Observations* exposed the rift in the church as bridgeable once the extremes were renounced.

But Bishop Bancroft, who became archbishop of Canterbury ten months after the Hampton Court Conference, apparently did not accept Bacon's claim of "golden mediocrity," and James I failed to address many of the reforms proposed in *Certain Considerations*, while responding positively to the others largely in general or carefully limited terms.⁶ The principle of uniformity that James avowed at the Hampton Court Conference, that he would have "one doctrine, one discipline, one religion, in substance and ceremony" (as cited in *Works* 10.128-132),

left no room for the principle of diversity Bacon had first advocated in the *Advertisement* and then restated in *Certain Considerations* as the basis for mediocrity in the church, “one faith, one baptism, and not, one hierarchy, one discipline” (*Works* 10.108). Bacon’s seasonable plaster was implicitly rejected by both bishop and king, and the wound in the church only grew worse.

Although the failure of his plan for the reform of the church did not lose Bacon the favor of James, it apparently led him to avoid ecclesiastical matters altogether in the future. Writing in the proem to the undated and unfinished *De Interpretatione Naturae* (assigned to 1603-1604 by its editors, *Works* 10.82), possibly the first philosophical work he had begun since “The Praise of Knowledge,” Bacon claimed that at one time he was not without hope (the condition of Religion being at that time not very prosperous) that if I came to hold any office in the state, I might get something done too for the good of men’s souls. When I found however that my zeal was mistaken for ambition, and my life had already reached the turning-point, . . . I put all those thoughts aside. (*Works* 10.85)

Consequently, he determined to devote himself henceforth to the study of natural philosophy.

Although Bacon does not identify the date of this turning-point, the most obvious moment for it would be between the calling in of *Certain Considerations* in 1604 and the first printing of a philosophical work by him, the *Advancement of Learning*, in 1605. Prior to 1605 his ecclesiastical writings are lengthy, substantial, and addressed to the public or to public figures, while his philosophical pieces—the letter to Burghley, “The Praise of Knowledge,” the proem to *De Interpretatione Naturae*, and possibly *Temporis Partus Masculus* and *Valerius Terminus*—are all brief, fragmentary, and remarkably personal. But from 1605 on he wrote nothing on ecclesiastical policy, while publishing much philosophical work publicly dedicated to James I. Whatever the date of the turning-point, the proem makes clear that there

was a connection between Bacon's churchmanship and his science, but it was a negative one. When he ceased to work at healing the one, he began promoting the other.

But there is a positive connection as well, for the pattern established in his ecclesiastical writings bore fruit as a model for his philosophical writings. The relationship between the *Advertisement* and *Certain Considerations* is exactly paralleled by that between the *Advancement of Learning* and the *Novum Organum*. In the *Advancement* Bacon presents a serious satire on the diseased state of human knowledge, while in the *Novum Organum* he offers a positive means of curing it. What primarily kept the disease alive, he asserted, were the two major schools of philosophy, that of Aristotle and the Scholastics with its deductive generalizations and that of the alchemists and others with its undirected experimentation. Like prelacy and Puritanism, these schools stood at opposite extremes and committed piracy on true knowledge. After exposing the flaws of the philosophical schools, as of the ecclesiastical factions, Bacon sought to replace them with a mediating position, one which would bind abstract generalization to concrete experimentation, like bishops to presbyters or prelates to Puritans, in the "golden mediocrity" of induction.

This reformation in learning Bacon viewed as he did his proposed reform of the church, not as an innovation but as a restoration. The *Instauratio Magna*, the unfinished masterwork intended to include both the *Advancement* and the *Novum Organum*, means the "Great Restoration." The scientific method of induction would restore man to the prelapsarian knowledge of Adam, just as the reforms in *Certain Considerations* would restore the church to its best primitive state. But restoration to an original state in both cases would only be a step toward a future state of fruitful blessings, in which a spiritual temple surpassing the temple of Solomon would be matched by scientific wisdom surpassing the wisdom of Solomon.

In the end Bacon's plaster for science proved more seasonable than that for the church. James I, the British Solomon, could not help but be pleased by the scientific project Bacon dedicated to him. Only three months after the publication of the *Novum Organum* Bacon was accorded his highest title, Viscount St. Albans. But it took twenty more years for the suppressed *Certain Considerations* to be recognized and published by a rebelling Parliament. By then, however, the infection Bacon had hoped to cauterize and cure with moderate measures was ready to set the whole nation aflame in Civil War.

Notes

1. The theory and ensuing controversy is documented and summarized in I. Bernard Cohen, *Puritanism and the Rise of Modern Science: The Merton Thesis* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

2. Julian Martin, *Francis Bacon, the State, and the Reform of Natural Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 24, 29-33; and Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1-19, 493-512. Further citations from the latter are indicated parenthetically by "Vickers."

3. James Spedding et al., ed., *Works of Francis Bacon*, 14 vols. (London: Longmans, 1858-74), 8: 43-50, 10: 49. Further citations from this collection are indicated parenthetically by "*Works*."

4. Vickers 496; Patrick Collinson, *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), 153.

5. Lawrence A. Sasek, ed., *Images of English Puritanism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 338-41.

6. Edward Cardwell, *A History of Conferences*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1849), 212-17.