

LITERATURE AND  
RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN  
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY  
ENGLAND

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*Introduction: spirit and circumstance  
in Caroline Protestantism*

In the decades of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, authors attempting to secure English Protestant orthodoxy against its critics undertook something more daring in the process: a rich and complex inquisition into the wide cultural constituents of religious experience itself. By and large, these writers were less interested in articulating a core of doctrine than they were in exploring and testing the very conditions in which their faith was imagined, situated, and lived. From the publication of Bacon's last works in the 1620s to the culmination of the Civil War in 1648, a spectrum of writers took stock of what they tend to call the "circumstances" of their faith, a term that ranges in meaning from the "pomp and circumstance" of religious heroism and ritual to the analysis of the modes of reverential thought itself. In these years, the term "circumstance" was applied to the spiritual, social, and legal constituents of a "person" as well as the cosmic or natural order enveloping a person. Carried out in print, in small communities, from the pulpit, on stage, and at court, the Caroline reexamination of English Protestant orthodoxy certainly generated its own versions of dogmatism, but its main tendencies leaned toward the intensive, probing scrutiny of the matrix of religious experience, lending support to Thomas Browne's contention that dogmatic appearances notwithstanding, "the wisest heads prove at last, almost all Scepticks."<sup>1</sup> Whatever their dogmatic way-stations, that is, these "heads prove" inventive seekers after the historical, imaginative, ritualistic, social, epistemological, and natural conditions in which English Protestantism tends to lapse, struggle, and thrive.

In part, this stocktaking of the "circumstances" of English Protestantism was prompted by the Caroline writers' sense that their "true religion" was increasingly humiliated by fleeing nonconformists and besieged by foreign papists. Both these rival groups accused the Church of England of becoming mired in the casuistry of circumstance. But the critique of circumstance carried out by a wide spectrum of English

Protestant writers took aim at something much more familiar within the boundaries of what William Laud called the “hedge” and George Herbert the “double moat” of the church – namely, the criteria for assessing the sometimes mundane and palpable, sometimes elevated and elusive, conditions and instruments mediating God’s gracious dispensations. At times, one circumstance of faith might be explored in isolation from all the others. A writer might review the conditions of religious heroism through the lens of recent developments in warfare, in colonization, and in the decoration of the church, or survey the past and future of the English church, the “circumstance of time.” The habitually doubting conscience of these revisions often doubles as experimentation: thus Caroline assessments of the failures of recent Protestant heroics fertilize the intellectual and spiritual ground of such rich and unusual communities as Great Tew and Little Gidding.

But in Caroline religious discourse, one circumstance often leads to another. For instance, the search for the criteria of a heroic Protestant faith dovetails with debates over the status of ceremony in worship, a matter that reticulates with the interior workings of fancy and the senses, and generally with the newly sophisticated analysis of the epistemology of religious experience. In turn, this exploration of the benefits and liabilities of “fancy” in the practices of the church converges with the studies of the social category of the “person” – studies with far-reaching implications for Christian notions of social decorum or hierarchy, of ministry, and of the evidence for salvation. All the circumstances of faith – heroic, epistemological, cultic, and social – tend to merge in the extraordinary rereading of the Book of Nature carried out in the years after the launch of Bacon’s Great Instauration. Adapting Seneca’s notion that the *pneuma* surrounds or “stands around” us all, Caroline Protestant writers assemble all the other conditions of their faith as they rethink the constituents of nature and the methodology of natural philosophy. That is, the most explosive catalyst for the Caroline stocktaking of the state of English Protestantism is the study of that circumstance that challenges the centrality of the human condition itself in the landscape of God’s providence – the circumstance of nature.

Despite the casuistic and interrogative thrust of so many Caroline writers, the stocktaking quality of English Protestantism in these decades has often been overlooked on the part of those church historians who seek to celebrate Caroline religion as the very “spirit” of Anglicanism or to vilify it as the corruption of that faith. Until the recent work of Achsah Guibbory and Kevin Sharpe, a major reason for such equally

extreme, if contradictory, distortions of Stuart religion in the second quarter of the seventeenth century was that scholars commonly limited “religion” far too narrowly and apportioned their methods along rigid disciplinary lines.<sup>2</sup> Literary critics stuck mainly to poems and fictions, historians restricted themselves to sermons, visitation reports, and other “documentary” evidence. Meanwhile they often reduced the category of religion to narrowly doctrinal concerns, usually with the teleological aim of explaining the Civil War (1642–48) and its explosion of radicalism.

But the Caroline emphasis on the circumstances of English Protestant faith demands that the range of texts under consideration be expanded, together with the category of religion itself. As Guibbory has written, religious disagreements in the Caroline period must be understood in a “larger human and cultural” context than a “more narrow theological or political” focus will allow; what is more, this larger cultural understanding requires that the scholar gain “a better grasp of the symbolic meanings of the conflict over worship,” which demands “a reinterpretation of seventeenth-century literature, so much of which is concerned with religion” (1). “Religion” comprises not just matters of salvation and worship but also the conflicts found in ethics, social dynamics, epistemology, and natural studies. Or, as Guibbory puts the point, Caroline authors understood that their religious conflicts “involved not simply rival conceptions of God, but conflicting constructions of human (and Christian) identity and of personal, social, and political relations” (4).

The best way to unpack the Caroline investigations of a broadly defined set of religious circumstances involves bringing to bear on English Protestantism a reorientation that Kevin Sharpe has urged on historians of early modern politics: “to pay attention to the representations that contemporaries presented of (and to) themselves,” making sure that historians and literary critics join forces in an examination of “discourse and symbols, anxieties and aspirations, myths and memories” (*Remapping*, 3). Between 1620 and 1648, the “wiser heads” assessing and representing the circumstances of orthodox religious experience would not have agreed with some twentieth-century historians that their vein of Protestantism was so pure as an alchemical “spirit” or so debased as the devil incarnate. As William Chillingworth would argue in 1637, somehow the greatness of English orthodoxy was wrapped up with its fallibility. At the same time, recusant and nonconformist writers situating themselves outside the orthodox fold of English Protestantism boldly objected to a circumstantial religion, and even took action to remove themselves from its slough. But in their efforts at separation, recusants and nonconformists

found in powerful and painful ways that the highly imperfect conditions of their faith could not be elided. They too came to terms with the imperfections to which the Caroline stocktaking of the circumstances of Protestant faith testified, and at which a rhetorically attentive study of that religious culture must take its aim.

## I

It is Archbishop Laud, impeached and on trial for his life, who perhaps most emphatically insists on a careful assessment of religious circumstance. On the nineteenth day of his trial, he answers the charge “that at the High-Commission . . . I did say that the Church of Rome and the Protestants did not differ in fundamentals, but in circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> Allowing then setting aside the possibility that he, like anyone involved in theological speculation, might simply and earnestly have erred in this assessment, Laud proceeds to explain that it is wrong to minimize the value, weight, and status of circumstances, to assume that they matter little:

Thirdly, these two learned witnesses [Burton and Lane] (as they would be reputed) are quite mistaken in their very terms. For they report me, as if I said, ‘not in fundamentals, but in circumstantialis;’ whereas these are not *membra opposita*, but fundamentals and super-structures, which may sway quite beside the foundation. (4.336)

Laud is ready with examples of those circumstances, neglected by or unknown to his opponents, “that many times . . . in religion do quite destroy the foundation. For example: the circumstances are these: *Quis? Quid? Ubi? Quibus auxiliis? Quomodo? Quando?*” Skipping the personal “who,” Laud commences with the more clearly fundamental “what.” “Place” seems less promising at first, “a mere circumstance; yet to deny that Christ took our flesh of the B. Virgin, and that in Judea, denies the foundation, and is flat Judaism.” The means of belief – “by what helps a man believes” – can lead to heresy if one overemphasizes human self-sufficiency, a matter of central importance in the Antinomian trials held in Massachusetts, while a question of time, again “a mere circumstance,” might arise in one’s refusal to believe “that Christ is already come in the flesh,” a position that “denies the foundation utterly, and is flat Judaism, and an inseparable badge of the great Antichrist, 1 John iv.” Revisiting his favorite circumstances of place, time, and means, those sacraments and ceremonies so basic to his vision of the church, Laud reminds his examiners that each one of them considers the rite of

transubstantiation a crucial instance of the intersection between foundation and circumstance. Indeed his language almost reverses the normal order in positing that such a rite is fundamental “upon the bare circumstance of *quomodo*,” a point in keeping with his casuistical rule “that some circumstances *dant speciem*, give the very kind and form to a moral action” (4.337).

If Laud wants to ensure that his “Puritan” critics appreciate the pivotal role of circumstance in salvation, worship, and moral action, recusants deride Laud’s church for being mired in fanciful, ecclesiastical, and epistemological accidents – indeed, never so forcefully as in the 1620s and 30s when, as some Catholics scoff, the Church of England has putatively discovered its own deficiencies and is desperate to repair them. In the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, advocates of the Church of England are deeply committed to the investigation of religious circumstance as the most pervasive and pious level of religious experience. But critics of their church have a strong conviction that the bog of circumstance is stagnant and debased, filled with the debris of the world’s vanity fair. For these critics, a focus on circumstance amounts to cunning policy at best, and hapless perplexity at worst.

For the advocates of orthodox English Protestantism writing in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, the conditions of English Protestantism are not newly distilled into some purer form; “circumstance” is not narrowly political, and not reducible to policies foisted on the public by a king’s ideological obsessions and personal paranoia. Rather, this generation of English Protestants produces a far-reaching and exploratory reckoning of the lived conditions and imaginative categories of their rich but beleaguered faith.

Throughout the twentieth century, some very brilliant scholars of the English religious imagination between 1625 and 1648 have tended to reduce or ignore the inquisitive complexity of Caroline religious discourse. Sometimes reduction is ideological: advocates of “Anglicanism” have distilled the very spirit of their faith into a world view attributed to the “Caroline divines.” In one famous instance of this scholarly alchemy, *The Structure of Caroline Moral Theology*, H. R. McAdoo never explains why his distillation of the spirit of seventeenth-century “Anglicanism” – and really that of the late sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries as well, perhaps simply “Anglicanism” for all time – should be called “Caroline.” The royal name is dropped from the title and contents of McAdoo’s 1965 book, *The Spirit of Anglicanism: A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century*. But the later book is written very much as an extension

of the former, and both together on the foundation of a 1935 anthology compiled by Paul Elmer More and Frank Leslie Cross, *Anglicanism: The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, Illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*. With no more explanation than McAdoo provides in 1949, More and Cross conclude their volume with a section devoted to “Caroline Piety.”

Sometimes reduction reflects a polarized state of scholarship: since the 1980s, the advent of the so-called Tyacke thesis, which argues for the hegemony of “anti-Calvinism” in the Caroline church, has lassoed scholars into a debate over the putatively core doctrine of English Protestantism under the rule of Charles I and William Laud. Still other scholars of English Protestantism have recoiled from what they consider the tyranny of state religion in the 1620s and 30s. In 1992, a compelling vilification of Caroline Protestantism was published, Julian Davies’s *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625–1641*. Davies’s title conceals no mystery: his book is dedicated to the argument that far from distilling the spirit of English Protestantism, “Carolinism” held that spirit hostage and amounted to “a very weird aberration from the first hundred years of the early reformed Church of England.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast to McAdoo, for whom the “Carolines” represent English theology “at the apogee of its splendour and virility” (*Structure*, 13), Davies believes that the evangelical mainstream of earlier English Protestantism – “the more enthusiastic, evangelical type of Protestants” – was marginalized and suppressed by a king whose policies distilled an elixir of political ideology tragically poisonous to reformed spirituality.

Suspecting that the “spirit” of his “Carolines” has something to do with circumstance, McAdoo allows that “Sanderson . . . repeatedly stresses the importance of circumstances in cases . . . The phrases ‘circumstances duly considered’ and ‘the infinite variety of human occurrences’ are a thought never far from Sanderson’s mind” (*Spirit*, 42–43). But in both of his books, McAdoo emphasizes how the “Caroline” divine examines then escapes the clutches of mere circumstance. Such a divine offers a practical and rational method governed by a humbly skeptical search for truth rather than doctrinaire systems; preserves scripture in its undeniable prominence and avoids arid rationalism and legalism; and marries critical freedom of judgment and wise obedience to authority in an eclecticism that nonetheless produces something of great permanence and observes the difference between fundamentals and *adiaphora*. Moreover, this divine knows when to be tolerant, when rigorous, and he is balanced



in his optimism about human educability; is committed to the ancient and visible church but also to the modernized study of nature as part of a nexus of resources for religious devotion and method; is defined in habits of thought less by changing historical circumstances and personal idiosyncrasies than by those moderate qualities shared by the gathering at Great Tew, the Cambridge Platonists, Hooker, Andrewes, Laud, Sanderson, and Taylor, the latitudinarians and the new philosophers, and of the latter especially those of the Interregnum and Restoration; believes in a God more wise than willful and in accordance pursues holy living in action and discourse rather than subtle theological controversy; and builds guidelines for the average Christian by way of response to social, theological, and moral circumstances in what McAdoo calls their “relevance to the conditions of reality.”<sup>5</sup> Historical circumstances only vaguely matter for McAdoo’s alchemy. They are either the private, unknowable vicissitudes of daily living or the briefly listed parade of major events (314) that forced the otherwise peaceful “Anglicans” into controversy. In *Spirit* as in *Structure*, Charles I makes only a brief appearance.

For Julian Davies, however, Charles is the starring antagonist whose villainy consists of imprisoning the true spirit of English Protestantism. If for McAdoo Charles is a fleeting embodiment of the Anglican *pneuma*, for Davies, rich instances of Caroline spirituality such as Little Gidding matter only to the extent to which they supposedly enter Charles’s imagination. And the king’s is not an imagination for which Davies cares much. It is the narrow, self-serving, yet aggressive imagination of a paranoid tyrant, whose “obsessive drive [was] to eradicate ‘profanity,’ ‘popularity,’ and disorder” (3). Superimposing an ideology of sacrosanct kingship on the evangelical mainstream of English Protestantism, Davies’s Charles is a lawless interloper whose chief ministers – while in considerable agreement with the king’s desire for uniformity, reverence, and decency in worship – prefer more lawful and flexible modes of operation.

Recent “revisionist” historians are wrong, Davies argues, in maintaining that the conflicts developing into civil war were bureaucratic rather than ideological or that the Arminians upset a Puritan status quo. Before Charles, Davies believes, Puritanism was indeed the *locus amoenus* of clergy high and low, of monarchs and people alike; it was an English Protestantism dedicated to supplementing the ordinary means of spirituality with such other godly means as lectures and prophesyings. The revisionists are right, then, in their argument that the 1620s and 30s were critical years of conflict for the English church. Not Laud and the Arminians, however, but an atheological Charles and his personal magnification of

a Davidic ideology were responsible for forcing good peaceful Christians into resistance. His target was, if not spirit, at least vital claims on the Holy Spirit, for Charles aimed “to marginalize and anathematize the most vital force within the Church as sectarian and subversive” (10). In a sense, Davies implies that McAdoo was right to emphasize the moral theology of Caroline spirituality; only, the king’s is a moral standard of deference and sacralization that took its excuses from the jurisdiction of the temple but sought the utter destruction of any suspected enemy of a numinous court and a priestly monarch. What is more, virtually everyone was suspected – of disloyalty, irreverence, and anarchy.

For Davies, it is Charles (not Laud) urging the reissue of the Book of Sports; it is Charles (again, not Laud) who is obsessed with the rail and with altar policy. Both Charles and Laud want visible forms and accoutrements that will secure and manifest deference, order, and unity; but when attempts are made to bring iconoclasts, nonconformists, and the Scots into line with these ideals, it is Charles and not Laud who has no sense of tact, accommodation, or law. Concerned mainly with the status of the church and clergy and with lay interlopers in their domain, Laud is left to distort the truth in order to keep favor, minimizing the extent of nonconformity and maximizing the success of the royally mandated crackdown.

This last point – that Charles was basically out of touch with the religious realities that he sought so fervently to contain and to shape – raises a big question for the understanding of English Protestantism in the 1620s and 30s: what does it mean to say that the king, his ideology, and the policies that diffused it “captivated” the vitality of the church? Even if there is truth in Davies’s compelling yet polemical argument about Charles, how much does it matter – for religion as practiced at Little Gidding, for example – what Charles had in mind or in store for “the Church”? It seems obvious that Charles’s “personal stamp” was only one of the constituents of the religious imagination in the decades of his rule and that, as one sees with Little Gidding, this royal constituent had a way of contributing to the richness of contemporary spirituality, partly in the various and quite extraordinary reactions against the king’s official ideology and partly in service to or imitation of his ideals. Davies values – but regarding the 1630s hedges on – the survival of the English Protestant mainstream. On the one hand, then, Charles’s oppressive policies are said to be “illusory,” unable to effect the reduction of the church that the king so fervently desired; on the other, these desires and policies are compared to a cancer so that whatever the vitality of religious culture

under his rule, Charles infected the church and made it very difficult for godly ministers and lay people to remain healthy (171).

Davies is as little interested as McAdoo, then, in discussing the rich and various stocktaking of Protestantism in the 1620s and 30s. In *The Caroline Captivity of the Church*, a powerful chorus follows Laertes in rejoicing that “the King, the King’s to blame.” When he sets aside Charles, Davies demonstrates as clearly as anyone the many practical variations that operated within the loopholes of policy. But variation in Caroline spirituality underwhelms Davies. Laud, who stayed away from court, nonetheless (Davies argues) was too indebted to Charles, too legalistic, and too paranoid himself to enjoy loopholes very much. No doubt he was having the nightmares recorded in his diary in large part because of the perils of high political and religious office under Charles. What about everyone else? Davies devotes an entire chapter to Arminianism and at times concedes a point that McAdoo resists, namely, that the intricacies of *ordo salutis* mattered to some Caroline religious writers. But his stress is unproductively on the overemphasis that soteriology has received from Nicholas Tyacke and the critics of his position that the Caroline church was overrun by “anti-Calvinists.” It is Davies’s tendency to insist that where Arminian questions of divine decree arose in the 1620s and 30s, the middle part of the spectrum was more commonplace than the polarities, the debates were nothing new, they were always subsumed by other ideological divides (to which in any case they have a relationship so uneven as to render it meaningless), and Charles only wanted to get rid of doctrinal controversies anyway.

Whether or not Charles “destroyed” or “captured” Caroline spirituality, Davies ironically follows in the footsteps of his least favorite king. For his is a book obsessed with policy rather than the exploration, opposition, or for that matter the middle ground that survived together with, despite, and against Charles’s illusions of power and Laud’s dreams of control.

In making a more positive case for Charles I, Kevin Sharpe’s *The Personal Rule of Charles I* is much more attentive to the richness of the Protestant imagination in the years leading up to the Civil War. Sharpe concurs with Davies that order, decency, and conformity mattered more to the king than “fine theological distinctions,” but unlike Davies, he assigns to the monarch religious motives that were at once a sign of “personal faith” and not altogether repellent to the English people. The faith of his Charles is not unlike the Caroline spirit of McAdoo’s Anglicanism, pietistic and moral rather than theoretical and subtle. This

Charles is capable of theological debate but not interested in it, for he fills his life – both private and public – with ceremonies of sincere devotion.<sup>6</sup>

If there is a spirit to Sharpe's Caroline Protestantism, it is concocted with far greater parish-by-parish archival effort than McAdoo's, and with greater sensitivity to the nuances of rhetoric in which ideas are represented. Sharpe's key metaphor for his method of gaining access to this spirit is a tour rather than a concoction. For Sharpe, the variety of local circumstances *is* spirit, and the Caroline religious imagination is shaped by historical circumstances without really investigating the categories of circumstance. Unlike McAdoo, who showcases Sanderson's casuistry of circumstances but wavers on the relevance of factual change for the Anglican spirit, Sharpe honors historical circumstance with pride of place in the titles of one part ("A Turn of All Affairs': Changed Circumstances and New Counsels") and one chapter ("The Greatest Measure of Felicity? Conditions and Circumstances") of his book. But in large part, his use of "circumstance" is not ideational but topical and narrative. It features "events . . . unfolding – or not unfolding"; the fluctuating factors and priorities of policy; diplomatic maneuvering or "developments"; and material conditions. Sometimes it comprises the category of, "we might say, psychological circumstances." The latter range from the template of the "royal mind," with its "grammar of order, reform and efficiency," to the more widely spread perception of policies, whatever the political circumstances of their administration. But unlike some of his other works, which focus on the representation of ideas and ideals, Sharpe's *Personal Rule* is so intent on redeeming Charles and Laud that what Caroline writers imagined is usually a way of revaluing what they in fact lived. As in Davies's book, ideas are studied most often in the grammar of policy and in the uses of and responses to that grammar. So it is that Sharpe can ask the incisive question about Charles, Laud, and their relationship to Puritanism: did they "create the threat they had imagined?" (603–05, 732).

## II

The Caroline religious imagination flourishes neither as the reified spirit of Anglicanism nor as the local permutations of policy but in its explorations of the conditions and circumstances of a Protestant life of faith. Given their tendency to believe that certainty derives mainly from outward conformity rather than from theological dispute, Charles and Laud might warrant the label of skeptics. But skeptical religious thought

as we find it variously dramatized in the texts of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s is more exploratory and inventive than the king and his chief prelate would prefer. The writers of this period often focus their attention on some semantic field of the word “circumstance,” a rich and complex nodal term that ranges across a wide spectrum of Christian concerns, agitates those concerns, but also laces them intricately together.

Thomas Browne opens his *Religio Medici* with this dilemma – “For my Religion, though there be severall circumstances that might perswade the world I have none at all . . .” – then orients circumstance toward natural philosophy and its relationship to faith.<sup>7</sup> Two paragraphs later he comes back to the word, only now in an ecclesiastical context: “I cannot laugh at but rather pity the fruitlesse journeys of Pilgrims, or contemne the miserable condition of Friers; for though misplaced in circumstance, there is something in it of devotion: I could never heare the *Ave Marie* Bell without an elevation, or thinke it a sufficient warrant, because they erred in one circumstance, for me to erre in all, that is in silence and dumbe contempt” (63). Contemporary explorations of the term agree with Browne that it is useful in working out the problems plaguing faith’s interaction with natural philosophy and papist ceremony, but its usage extends to Caroline doubts about whether the Protestant faith has retained, refined, or squandered its heroic mission; and to their uncertainties about how social values articulate with spiritual ideals. Writing in the 1620s and 30s, Joseph Mede is typical of his contemporaries when in close proximity he enlists the term “circumstance” to depict the place and time of ceremony; the “pomp” associated with militarism; the holiness that sets religious persons apart; the events and details of historical discourse; and the ancillary issues of theology.<sup>8</sup>

In the Caroline stocktaking of the human experience and construction of Protestant faith, religious circumstance pertains to the discursive conditions of persons, places, and times (both past and future); to the circumscribing realities of matter and providence; to worship as decoration and as imagination; to the ways in which Protestants interact, institute their churches, think, solve moral and social dilemmas; and to the means through which they dramatize, spread, and heroize the faith, and find salvation. At a time when English Protestant writers are responding to a heightened Roman Catholic and non-conformist critique, to intellectual skepticism and philosophical revisionism throughout Europe, to the quagmire of religious warfare, to disillusionment over yet renewed hope in the colonial project, to reappraisals of decorum and dynamics in Christian society, to disenchantment with

doctrinal polarization and polemics, and to the accentuation of fault lines within the *ecclesia anglicana* itself: in the years of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, that is, “circumstance” assumes a prominence in the English religious lexicon, and gives coherence to the complex reinvestigation of the aspirations and rites, the interior experiences and social signifiers, the natural framework and ministerial instruments of Protestant life in England. Caroline writers use the term “circumstance” when reasserting or refashioning order or boundaries in their religious culture, but also with a skepticism that suspects circumstantiality of unsettling order and of crossing borders.

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is of considerable help in sketching the range of concerns that agitate the Caroline examination of the circumstances of faith.<sup>9</sup> One gloss (II.7.a) – “The ‘ado’ made about anything; formality, ceremony, about any important event or action” – encompasses two interlocking preoccupations: Protestant heroism and ecclesiology. The more learned Caroline writers recognize that the Latin terms *circumstantia* and *circumsto* often concretize the notion of “standing around” or “surrounding” in terms of a military encirclement by hostile troops around a town or army about to be invaded and occupied. But as I argue in chapters 1 and 2, English Protestantism in the years 1620 to 1650 is deeply invested in a reconstitution of heroism, not least because, like Othello’s agonized farewell to the “Pride, Pompe and Circumstance of glorious warre,” there is a deep-seated fear that Protestant valor is lapsing.<sup>10</sup>

In chapters 1 and 2, I argue that the 1620s and 30s bear witness to a rich, wide-ranging, and skeptical review of the history and nature of heroism in the church. At the Caroline court, at the home of the Ferrars at Little Gidding, and at Great Tew, the estate of Lucius Cary, second Viscount Falkland, communities of Caroline Christians reassert but also question the status and conditions of the church heroic from a wide variety of vantage points: the masques of “heroic virtue”; the history of martyrdom; the paradigm of Charles V and his abdication from religious warfare; the colonization of Virginia; the Elizabethan past with such heroic figures as Drake; church beautification; the English legends of St. George; and skepticism itself. The chapters argue that Caroline religious culture is dissatisfied with its own heroism, with its relationship to past forms of heroism, and with those old forms themselves. At the same time, this culture struggles to make a virtue out of doubt by inventing composites of heroism but also by converting doubt into the conscientious greatness of the Church of England.

For Caroline writers, however, questions of decorum in Christian worship and society are just as prominent as those of heroism. The usage of “circumstance” to mean “decorum” is well documented throughout the early seventeenth century: as a famous instance, Shakespeare uses “circumstance” to suggest formal, decorous, or ceremonial behavior of any kind in *The Winter’s Tale* (v.i.90), when Leontes notes that Prince Florizel comes to his court “So out of circumstance and sudden . . . ’Tis not a visitation framed, but forced / By need and accident.”<sup>11</sup> But when Laudian support for church decoration infuses the debates about heroism and ecclesiology alike, the two circumstances are united, if also competitive, in the Caroline exploration of what might elevate the English church to greatness. Moreover, both the beautification and the heroism of the church lead Caroline writers to decipher the circumstance of time, with critics of the English noninvolvement in the Thirty Years War looking to Drake for their model while the Laudians appeal to the medieval heritage of the church.

But, as I argue in chapter 3, church ceremony is itself a special “circumstance” often treated apart from questions of heroism and in the context of yet another gloss on circumstance having to do with perception and knowledge. When Hamlet speaks of “our circumstance and course of thought,”<sup>12</sup> his usage is philosophically rich: “circumstance” is the term to which skeptical critiques of human certainty classically revert; it is central to the work of Sextus Empiricus. But it has other influential classical legacies as well. Connecting the little world of man to the greater world of nature, the word often figures in the Stoic description of the pervasive *pneuma* that inhabits human beings as the faculty of imagination. In so many ways, the conditions of human knowledge, sense perception, imagination, and discourse are under review in religious writing of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s: in the Baconian revision of philosophical method and pneumatology; in the heroic skepticism to which Chillingworth and Falkland turn; and in the curious relationship between ceremony and “fancy” that chapter 3 unfolds. For those writers trying to consolidate and unify the identity and practices of the Church of England in the face of challenges by Puritan and papist alike, ceremony is conceived as very much surrounding the church in a defensive manner: in his conference with Fisher, Laud speaks of ceremony as the hedge around the church, while George Herbert writes of the Church of England as “double-moat[ed]” by the grace of God – this in a poem that celebrates the moderation of the Stuart church.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, “fancy” is customarily stereotyped as the amorphous, factious enemy to uniformity,

order, and decency in church. But fancy is also the most intimate and active supplier of that holy passion and sensation necessary for ceremony to do its special work; and (as I discuss in the two chapters on natural philosophy) this faculty is often linked to the notion of a *pneuma* permeating and homogenizing the whole of the world. In short, the relationship between a putatively unpredictable, chaotic fancy and a uniform, decent ceremony is not so simple – in the diary of Laud, in masques at court, in the prose of Jeremy Taylor – as the polarities of Caroline polemicists often protest.

The Caroline meditation on ceremony and liturgy adds the circumstance of sacred place to the heroic circumstance of time. In chapters 4 and 5, the Caroline fascination with the status of personhood and with the nature of impersonation is added to considerations of time and place, in keeping with the rhetorical tradition that triangulates all three respects in a calculus of decorum. But “person” itself is religiously wide ranging in the discourse of the period, from moral casuistry to theoretical soteriology, and from the comedies about life in the town to handbooks about performance in the pulpit. Even more than with heroism or fancy, the category of the “person” illustrates how religious conflicts find their way into some of the most putatively profane texts of the 1620s, 30s, and 40s. It also corroborates Guibbory’s argument that in the Caroline period, conflicts over religious ceremony had enormous implications for the broadly social organization of “human beings in relationship with each other”.<sup>14</sup>

I have already noted McAdoo’s emphasis on Sanderson’s casuistry of circumstances, and in general early Stuart casuists are busy transforming the scholastic legacy of prescriptions for how the office of judging “That which surrounds [us] . . . morally” (OED, “circumstance,” I) should be carried out by the individual conscience. Like Sanderson, Donne knows full well how crucial the exploration of circumstance is to the resolution of moral dilemmas. In an earlier but proleptic instance found in *Biathanatos*, he concludes of self-homicide that “to mee there appears no other interpretation safe but this, that there is no external act naturally evill; and that circumstances condition them, and give them their nature; as scandall makes an indifferent thing hainous at that time, which, if some person go out of the roome, or winke, is not so.”<sup>15</sup> Some circumstances of actions are external and performative, then, but some are internal, namely, those involving the motivations of self-homicides that help us decide whether or not an act is godly or sinful.



In his Caroline sermons, Donne joins Sanderson in being keenly provoked by “personal” respects. Prompted by the Bible’s injunction against respect to persons, their contemporaries approach this circumstance of Protestantism from a variety of directions. For example, sermons *ad magistratam* warn judges of their duty to deal decorously yet evenhandedly with the “persons” of various social rank brought to them. In the wake of the death of Andrewes and the ascendancy of Laud, sermons *ad clerum* are involved in contemporary debates over the distinctive marks and honors of the ministerial “person” or “parson” – a controversy that links questions of persons to those of heroism and ceremony in the matter of what lends grandeur to the church. In the aftermath of the Synod at Dort other works respond to the question of how exactly God places value on persons, and their attempt to construct a genealogy of God’s decrees and of the processes of salvation intersects with the efforts of those Caroline playwrights and social theorists concerned in the aftermath of the inflation of honors with the decorum of everyday life.

In the matter of personal respects, then, circumstance can involve, apart or together, religious questions as diverse as “what does God see when He looks at our souls” to what kind of language a godly subject must use when he or she addresses an equal, a superior, or an inferior. In this respect, circumstance helps Caroline writers gauge how believers can mitigate offenses to God but also how citizens of the world can mitigate offenses to other human beings – as when Ben Jonson notes in line with OED II.6 (“circuitous narration; circumlocution, beating about the bush, indirectness”) that sometimes one must “speak that in obscure words, or by circumstance, which uttered plainly would offend the hearers.”<sup>16</sup> The casuistry of personal respects becomes all the more complex when the avoidance of spiritual offense produces social offense and vice versa.

In Caroline discourse, the circumstance that reticulates all the others is nature itself, what the OED calls “That which surrounds materially” (“circumstance,” 1). In *Naturales Quaestiones* (II.6.7.1), Seneca gives this usage its most simply physical, pneumatic gloss: “Our Stoics call this [i.e. *pneuma*] *circumstantia* [‘encirclement’], the Greeks *antiperistasis* [‘replacement’]. It occurs in air as well as in water, for air encircles every body by which it is displaced.” The term is well known in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s; Bacon, for example, uses it in his studies of “the measure of surrounding circumstances [*de mensura peristaseos*].”<sup>17</sup>

With Bacon’s public launching of his Great Instauration in the 1620s, Stuart readers are made privy to an extraordinary call for natural circumstance to be studied anew. This means, of course, that human beings

must reexamine their cosmic habitation whether pneumatic or particulate, but also that they must rethink their spiritual lives from the outside (concerning the character, reach, and visibility of providence) and from the inside (regarding the ways in which human beings think, believe, and imagine). In addition to pneumatic links between imagination and nature, Bacon's exploration of internal circumstance revisits the dialogue between fancy and ceremony – in the idols of the mind, for instance. But the most significant heritage behind the Caroline exploration of internal circumstance connects Bacon more fully to Edward Herbert and William Chillingworth than to Laud, namely, the critical legacy of skepticism.

In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus reviews those modes of critique by which the skeptic questions human certainty about whether knowledge captures or at least is commensurate with the underlying reality of the objects of human perception. Of these modes, all of which issue in the suspension of judgment, the fourth – “based, as we say, on the ‘circumstances’ [*peristaseis*]” – encapsulates many of the others:

And this Mode, we say, deals with states that are natural or unnatural, with waking or sleeping, with conditions due to age, motion or rest, hatred or love, emptiness or fulness, drunkenness or soberness, predispositions, confidence or fear, grief or joy.<sup>18</sup>

The skeptical critique maintains that human knowledge is always disposed or conditioned by a matrix of circumstances; or, put differently, that knowledge is circumstance – irreducibly differentiated according to age, physical welfare, wakedness, consumption, time, movement, and bias. Health does not amount to a condition for certain and confident judgment; it is rather a circumstance as productive of epistemological variation as sickness. In fact, our knowledge is so completely constituted by circumstances that we are in no position to assess the truth value of any one circumstance.

Under the influence of such Continental skeptics as Montaigne, Charron, and Descartes, English writers in the 1620s, 30s, and 40s are newly alert and responsive to the power of epistemological critique, including the terms of the fourth mode. Increasingly in the seventeenth century, skepticism affects the way in which evidence is measured, probability calculated, institutions and conventions assessed, and the mind itself situated. “Circumstance” is a word to which Stuart skeptics often return when characterizing human rationality, developing the implications of Donne's earlier summation in *Biathanatos* that “scarce any reason

is so constant, but that circumstances alter it” (*Prose*, 66). Knowledge is mediated not just by internal circumstances but by the context and impressions tendered by the object of perception. In this skeptical context, circumstance is often a reminder of human imperfection. But in the wake of Bacon’s full-scale promulgation of the Great Instauration in the early 1620s, the doubting conscience is increasingly a tool for attending more rigorously to natural circumstances; for improving the way in which human beings know things; and for repairing the way in which human beings live, interact, and aspire to the heroic stature originally bestowed on them by God. In the 1620s, 30s, and 40s, that is, doubt is more than ever a scourge and a minister for English Protestants.

In his last works, Bacon deploys but also surmounts the skeptical critique of the circumstances of thought and imagination on his way toward a full-scale reinvestigation of the natural circumstances surrounding human perception. In Bacon’s work and in that of his contemporaries, however, natural circumstances are also intricately linked to the mythical, temporal, social, ecclesiological, and soteriological circumstances of English Protestant faith. That is, nature is the hub of a wheel around which the most problematic conditions of Protestant faith in the Thirty Years War generation tend to revolve: how do the heroic past and the millennial future of Christendom help shape and guide the present Church of England? Is true religion inclusive or selective, is it ceremonial or plain, and what are the principles according to which these matters can be settled? What is the relationship between fortuitous second causes and supernatural, providential forces? What is the equitable place (if any) for respect to persons in the life and thoughts of the English Protestant? What are the criteria that set apart the clergy, or that validate the performance of righteousness? How does human “fancy” interact with the phenomena – natural, ceremonial, artistic, and spiritual – that envelop and stimulate it? So it is that the Caroline imagination flourishes in its stocktaking of individual circumstances – history, heroism, thought, fancy, place, person, decorum, natural phenomena, ceremony, salvation, and providence – but also in networks traceable in such writers as Thomas Browne and George Hakewill. And in this stocktaking, the intense and unsettled interrogation of the conditions of religious faith contends with the highly inventive attempts to compose and stabilize the circumstances of English Protestantism into an impressive defense against the highly aggressive assaults of violence, doubt, external rivalry, and the factious enemy within.

## III

In Caroline literature, the category of “circumstance” evokes complex imaginative work not least because it gravitates toward that fertile area where the indifferent and the fundamental converge. The OED corroborates this point by noting that “circumstance” can indicate a matter of great importance but also any “non-essential, accessory, or subordinate” detail. Just so with the Caroline Protestants: the vitality of their literature derives from what Donne calls an “agitation” provoking the faithful to move back and forth between the simple core of their catechisms and the trying conditions of their lives, at times uncertain of which is core and which condition, at times transforming one into the other.

In *Death's Duel* (1631), Donne provokes his auditors into examining their sins before they come to their Judge: “Hast thou been content to come to this *Inquisition*, this examination, this agitation, this cribration, this pursuit of thy *conscience*, to *sift* it, to follow it from the *sinnes* of thy *youth* to thy *present sinnes*, from the *sinnes* of thy *bed*, to the *sinnes* of thy *boorde*, and from the *substance* to the *circumstance* of thy *sinnes*?” (*Prose*, 326). As Laud reminds his prosecutors, circumstance sometimes bears directly on the fundamentals of doctrine and sometimes pertains not at all to the doctrinal core; one must work carefully to decipher the logic or the equity that conditions the relationship between the two.<sup>19</sup> Through the sifting of circumstances, Caroline Protestants are as eager to shore up the foundations of their church as they are worried that those foundations are either eroding or fraudulent. The result is a literature far-reaching in its inquiries yet focused on the problems of everyday Protestant faith.

There were many factors – and kinds of factors – contributing to Caroline religious agitation. Some were generational. By the 1620s, English Protestantism was mature enough to have become entrenched but also to have developed a sense of decadence, belatedness, and shortcomings – of promise unfulfilled and, as a corollary, of vulnerability. By contrast, Caroline religious and moral culture was bolstered by a growing awareness of the church’s vast resources – from the medieval liturgies to sixteenth-century controversialists, and including such prominent modern and native authorities as Foxe, Hooker, Perkins, and Andrewes. There was also a confidence among theologians that they were capable of advanced critical modes of assessing those resources.

Another powerful constituent of the generation of the 1620s was, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has argued, the Thirty Years War, an experience that shaped Caroline treatments of heroism, the millennium, and even

natural philosophy.<sup>20</sup> But other factors were more accidental and personal, and not just the character of the monarch and his chief ministers with their rage for conformity and decency. For example, the impeachment of Bacon lent him time to present his *Great Instauration* to the world and so radically altered the way in which the study of natural philosophy was understood. The Caroline fascination with the status of personhood emerged from a variety of contexts: from the elevated attention to Arminian soteriology at the Synod at Dort; the alternative styles of clerical vocation represented by the great and abundant Jacobean preachers but also by the rise of and conflict over Laudianism; by the development of the “town” as a laboratory for social interchange; by the great dramatic and ceremonial imagination of Ben Jonson; by the development of the technological means of colonization; by the sale of honors in Jacobean England; and by the development of the chancery courts, the aim of which was to oversee an equitable regard for personal circumstances.

As some of the accidental factors anticipate, there were pronounced ideational or ideological components to the religious imagination of Caroline writers: the ripening and diffusion of Continental skepticism; the consolidation of and polemical response against Arminianism; the elusive Rosicrucian call for the reformation of the world; the Caroline court’s allegorical preferences in the masque; the Little Gidding fascination with the history of Christian heroism; the devotion to Erasmus by the uncommonly appealing patron, Lucius Cary; the struggle of a Puritan gentry between spiritual vocation and social respects; the church-less rational theology of Edward Herbert; and the acute critiques of church infallibility by Chillingworth. In 1625, Charles came to the throne, the Ferrar family moved to Little Gidding, the Montagu affair was in an uproar, a new breed of playwrights was emerging, Sanderson attempted to map God’s decrees as he would a family tree, and Bacon’s five most productive years were coming to an end, having changed the face and course of English philosophy for evermore.

No one kind of cause – rather every kind – contributed to the extraordinary review of the circumstances and conditions of holy living that took place in the years in which Charles and Laud attempted to capture and to sublimate the spirit of English Protestantism. From Rome and Massachusetts, critics of the Church of England tried to convert this agitation of circumstances into the clearest evidence of all that the death bell was ringing for the church of Donne and Sibbes. In writing the

*Religion of Protestants*, however, Chillingworth argued that any church modestly yet sincerely working through the challenges of circumstance was only just beginning to thrive.

Unlike James, Charles found theological and ecclesiastical controversies suggestive of a church spinning out of control. If he attempted to capture and hold the church in place, his program is not so much reflective of a theological dyslexia<sup>21</sup> – about which historians disagree – as it is indicative of the irreducible complexity of that Protestant stocktaking carried out under his watch – from Bacon’s *New Atlantis* to Ferrar’s *Little Gidding*; from Laud’s diary to Sanderson’s casuistry; from Donne’s pulpit to Eleanor Davies’s prophecy; from the collapse of the Virginia Company to Mede’s calculations of the millennium; and from the rebuilding of the visible church to Lord Herbert’s churchless common notions. The lapses of consensus in the Caroline church meant not only that the church would be haunted by its own skepticism but also that it would be well stocked with alternatives for rebuilding a consensus more lasting than before. Indeed skepticism itself was the basis for one such alternative. Our finest historians continue to contend over the person of Charles; but even more than the character of Charles, the imaginative habits of those Christians that he governed have eluded the distillations of spirit, the records of policy, and such catchall nets as the “persecutory imagination.”<sup>22</sup> Between “substance” and “circumstance,” writers in the decades leading up and into the Civil War reconceived the faith of their people in brilliantly clear but also obscure and crosshatched patterns. Thus, the dispensations of Charles and the visitations of Laud affected but hardly imprisoned what Thomas Carew called – in reference to Donne – the “giant fancy” of those Caroline writers whose hope and labor it was to secure the English church as the epitome of true religion.<sup>23</sup> As their church came of age, the Caroline writers felt very deeply both the authority and the responsibility that attend maturity, no longer green and “unsifted in such perilous circumstance.”<sup>24</sup>