

19. Bryan Ball as Historian

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‘To review the historiography of Puritanism is to review the history of early modern England,’ wrote historian Peter Lake in his overview of the field.¹ Yet one can go a step further when reviewing the historiographical output of Bryan Ball, for while much of his historical research and writing explores Puritan thought in early modern England, it is also written with an eye on the history and theology of the Seventh-day Adventist church, though that denomination dates only from the mid-nineteenth century. This capacity to illuminate two periods of history through shedding light on the one is a distinctive feature of his historical writings. The selected chapters in this volume illustrate well the kind of historical coverage that Ball has achieved in his work.

The field of studies in Tudor and Stuart history has been a popular one, and rightly so, given the impact those eras have had on later British, European and indeed world history right up to the present. Religion played a central role in shaping the period and, therefore retrospectively, in understanding it. In particular, as Lake noted, Puritanism formed a critical part of the discourse of those times, and to study Puritanism is to enter into the essence of many of the key historical events that made the Tudor and Stuart eras seminal in history. Leading historians over several centuries have shed light on the personalities, events and issues of these times, but only relatively recently have historians begun to plumb the diversity of religious belief that characterised the movement collectively badged as Puritanism, an imprecise label that covers an astonishing diversity of beliefs and practices while encompassing all social classes, even having its adherents within the official Church of England, so often typified as a bulwark of conservative thought and practice.

The notable historian Christopher Hill was a leader in broadening scholarly attention from the centres to the margins of secular and clerical power. His work from the 1950s onwards was seminal in bringing the marginalised

1 Peter Lake, ‘The historiography of Puritanism’, in John Coffey & Paul C. H. Lim (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 346.

versions of Protestantism to the attention of both historians and the public. As a Marxist historian, he sought not only to find economic causal factors in the religious history of the day, but also to explore the ways in which alternative views challenged the bastions of power in the seventeenth century. In his footsteps, other historians expanded the studies of the marginalised, alternative and regional variations within Tudor and Stuart history.

It is firstly in this context that Ball's contribution as a historian of Puritanism has been significant. Puritanism has long been easy to caricature and stereotype, from contemporary Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century literary figures like William Shakespeare (whose character, the joyless prig Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, embodies the clichéd Puritan) and Ben Jonson (in a satire indicting Puritan theology and hypocrisy in *The Alchemist*, which includes mocking its views on the book of Daniel). Ball begins by asserting the validity of Puritan thought, demonstrating that far from being promoted exclusively by extremists, it was promoted by many respected and respectable figures within the Establishment, even if their advocacy of certain Puritan positions put that respectability at risk at times. He discusses insightfully the difficulties in defining Puritanism as a movement, noting that the term has been 'persistently misunderstood and misused'.² He emphasises that Puritanism initially developed as part of the diversity of Anglicanism. It was not until later, particularly during the reign of Charles I, through the Civil War, the Interregnum and Restoration, that there was a more distinct and formalised divide between Anglicanism, which became increasingly narrow and exclusive, and Puritanism, which became more aggressive in seeking 'a means for the recovery of true doctrine and the preservation of the true Christian way of life.'³ In fact, the narrowing of Anglicanism and the stridency of Puritanism were directly related, each being reactions to the behaviour of the other.

In several chapters in this volume, Ball notes the ways in which Anglican divines and prominent lay people in society advocated beliefs that were distinctly Puritan. Chapter 8 features pocket biographies of two Anglicans who had Puritan leanings: Joseph Mede and Samuel Bold. Mede is recognised for the quality of his scholarship and his wide influence in the field of biblical eschatology, and Ball names him as the father of English millenarianism. He expands on Mede's contribution to eschatological studies in Chapter 11, where the prominence of apocalyptic thought in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is given more detailed attention. Bold's career was a little different from Mede's in that his advocacy of both religious toleration and of the doctrine of mortalism made him controversial

2 Bryan W. Ball, Chapter 7, 'Puritans and Puritanism', 112.

3 Ball, 'Puritans and Puritanism', 112.

in the Restoration era, where he was one of the few Anglicans who dared voice heterodox opinions in an atmosphere of paranoid repression intended to eliminate any whiff of Puritanism within the Establishment.

The inter-related subjects of eschatology and the second advent of Christ are generally supported by mainstream opinion of the era, as Ball notes in Chapters 8, 11 and 14. Royal support came in the person of King James I, who fancied himself an amateur theologian and published a volume on demonology. Archbishop of Armagh James Ussher and Bishop of Norwich Joseph Hall published on Daniel and Revelation, adding weight to the popularity of studies on eschatology which had begun in the early days of the Reformation. Ball notes that their publications were successful and that four significant scholars in the area of eschatology—Thomas Brightman, John Napier, Arthur Dent and Joseph Mede—laid the foundations for future interpretations of Daniel and Revelation, evidenced by the repeated reprinting of their work, and their constant referencing in the works of later scholars. Ball credits the widespread advocacy of the doctrine of the Second Coming among both Anglicans and Non-Conformists as accounting for the warmth of Puritan spiritual life, the driving force of sanctification and the provider of Christian hope.

On the subject of the seventh-day Sabbath, Ball finds Anglican cleric Theophilus Brabourne's writings to be 'convincing apologetic literature.' His impressive output influenced later Sabbatarians, though for his views on this more controversial topic, Brabourne was imprisoned as a Judaizer. On another controversial doctrine, that of the soul's sleep after death, Ball finds support not from mainstream English reformers but from Martin Luther himself, as well as his more radical colleague Andreas Carlstadt. Ball discerns in Luther's writings evidence that he held to psychopannychism—that the soul slept after the death of the body, until reawakened and reunited with the body at the Resurrection. So also Carlstadt, and Ball argues that this understanding was closely connected to their eschatology. He does note, however, that mortalism in general was more characteristic of the radical Anabaptists, Spiritualists and Evangelical Rationalists, being hotly opposed by Calvin as constituting an intolerable heresy.

While Ball is able to demonstrate sectors of Anglicanism that promoted Puritan thought, naturally he does not consider this to be the limits of Puritanism, nor even its major manifestation. The more radical wing of Puritanism was apparent in various forms, ranging from mild Non-Conformism through to revolutionary and anarchist expression. Socially repressive Puritanism, as well as extremism which manifested itself in many bizarre and cultic versions, has more easily grabbed the imagination, typecasting the whole of Puritanism as simultaneously being both repressive and 'kill-joy'

on the one hand and, on the other, socially radical, attempting to eliminate class divisions, government, private property, even marriage and clothing in its more extreme forms. It became easy to reduce Puritanism collectively in all of its diversity to an ideology that posed a threat to the spiritual, emotional, moral and political well-being of the nation, and hence to persecute anyone of that label, even if their actual ideas were in themselves unthreatening. While radical (and often tiny) Puritan groups such as Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians, Ranters, Diggers, and Adamites have attracted scholarly attention and popular notoriety, both then and now, other groups who were persecuted at the time have since attained a level of respect and even influence. Quakers and Anabaptists, for example, equally feared and persecuted at the time, have birthed modern manifestations whose views have become tolerated and in some cases have even entered mainstream religious and secular opinion.

Ball takes particular interest in the latter groups of the Puritan tradition, highlighting that they canvassed some modern theological concerns. His chief interests are in Sabbatarianism and soul-sleep, as well as eschatology, which was also a passionate concern of radical Puritans. Associated with these beliefs came concerns over the nature of biblical inspiration and the role of reason in interpreting Scripture. Ball explores Anabaptists' opposition to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and their advocacy of psychopannychism in contrast to the Spiritualists, who tended to argue for a more radical version of mortalism, thnetopsychism, in which the soul has no separate existence from the body, being quite simply the breath that departs at death.

In this volume's chapters, Ball also investigates several radical individuals whose theology stood outside the mainstream of the time. Clement Writer, an uneducated radical who belonged to the rather vague group called 'Seekers', argued for mortalism and against a professional, formally educated clergy, believing that reason enlightened through the individual's connection with the Spirit was the best way to interpret Scripture. Three men, the poor weaver John James, the prosperous merchant Joseph Davis Snr, and the gentleman Francis Bampfield, are noted for their contribution to Sabbatarianism, though their fates were different. James was wrongly associated with Fifth Monarchists and suffered the horrific death of being hanged, drawn and quartered, while his congregation was persecuted. Davis was able to endow Sabbatarian groups with church property and pensions for ministers, which helped to ensure their survival for some time. Bampfield's effective preaching won him large congregations, but also imprisonment in conditions harsh enough to hasten his death.

While Ball's scholarship has advanced our knowledge of the nuances of Puritan thought in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his interest

in the area has not been purely academic. As an influential theologian in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (his career has included major leadership roles in the SDA church in England and Australia, including a stint as president of an Adventist college in Australia, as well as the presidency of the South Pacific Division of the world-wide church), he has sought to enlighten thinking on matters of theological interest to the church. Hence, his selected focus on the doctrinal issues of Puritanism which find their echo in the more distinctive elements of the theology of Adventism. He makes this link overt in his study of English Puritanism, which is subtitled *The Puritan Roots of Seventh-day Adventist Belief*, but the link also underpins most of his other historical writing, where this connection is more often implicit.⁴

It is here that Ball has made his second great contribution to historical scholarship. By tracing the antecedents to Adventist theology, he is able to locate Adventism in a deeper historical context than has generally been done, and in doing so he seeks to validate Adventism's distinctive emphases as beliefs with a long history in Christianity rather than as the innovations of the enthusiasms (both words with pejorative connotations with regard to religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) of a recent minor American sect. He endows apparently new Adventist doctrine with the credibility of reformers from the beginnings of Protestantism, thus upholding Adventism's claim to be true heirs of the Reformation movement.

This theme underpins the historical chapters in this volume, beginning with Chapter 7, where he emphasises the importance of paying attention to the Puritans precisely because their influence continued into the early twentieth century. As already noted, Ball's focus in Puritan history is predominantly with doctrines of Sabbatarianism, mortalism and eschatology, three areas of importance to Adventist thought and belief. His study of English Sabbatarianism in Chapters 9–10 identifies the role of a number of leading seventeenth-century Sabbatarians in establishing and fostering the notion of a biblical seventh-day Sabbath, and shows how the scholars of the era distinguished Christian Sabbatarianism from heretical Judaism.

In Chapter 11, which pays attention to Puritan eschatology, Ball notes many key ideas which recur in Adventist thought. He highlights the understanding that the Puritans had of the special role of the books of Daniel and Revelation in speaking 'with meaning and authority' to their present time in ways which other biblical prophecies (such as Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Zechariah) did not—a Puritan concept that is familiar to Adventist exegetes who hold those books to continue to apply to the present age.

4 Bryan W. Ball, *The English Connection; The Puritan Roots of Seventh-day Adventist Belief* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2nd edition, 2014 [1st edition, 1975]).

Ball claims the authority of the Puritans for Adventism's basic approach to eschatology, detailing their application of Historicism to Daniel and Revelation, and their interpretation of five fundamental symbols of prophetic literature: the day-year principle, the representation of earthly kingdoms and powers by the beasts, whose horns symbolise kinds of governments, the use of seas and waters to represent peoples, and the use of women to symbolise the church. He also traces the sound Puritan roots of common Adventist interpretations of the Antichrist, the kingdoms of Daniel 2 and 7 and the understanding of the basic structure of Revelation, in particular the visions of the seven seals and seven trumpets.

For added emphasis, he shows how the Protestant commentators of the seventeenth century dismissed both Preterist and Futurist views of prophecy (largely the fruits of Jesuit Catholic scholarship) thus anchoring Adventist eschatology firmly in the traditions of Protestant interpretation. In order to locate it further into the mainstream, he notes the risks identified in Puritan times for the discipline to lead to hasty and strained misinterpretation, suggesting that Adventist eschatology, by sharing its key features with that of Puritanism, had managed largely to steer clear of the dangers of lunatic interpretations.

On the related topic of the Second Advent of Christ, Ball again highlights Puritan beliefs that coincide with Adventist thought. The notion of a literal, visible, personal, imminent and glorious second coming was commonly held by Anglicans and Puritans alike. Likewise, the second coming governed their understanding of the whole Christian age, giving it eschatological significance, filling the Christian with hope and providing motivation for character transformation. Ball draws out how some thinkers of the era connected the first and second advents through the high priestly ministry of Jesus in heaven, paralleling Jesus' work to that of the high priest in the Old Testament sanctuary in bringing to full completion the work of redemption—again a notion which is at the heart of the Adventist doctrine of the investigative judgment of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary.

In his examination of the shades of conditionalist or mortalist doctrine in Chapter 15, Ball is less obviously foreshadowing Adventist thought, for he gives more or less equal emphasis to both psychopannychism and thneptpsychism, the latter reflecting more closely the Adventist doctrinal position. In drawing other parallels between the seventeenth and nineteenth century, he notes the Puritan use of the term 'Present Truth' to applications of prophecy in each generation as counter to falsehood, a term that recurs in Adventist literature. Similarly, the Puritan notion of progressive revelation has its manifestation in Adventism, as do the concepts of religious toleration and religious liberty.

While the main focus of Ball's historical work is on the doctrinal connections between selected Puritan thinkers and those of the Adventist movement of roughly two centuries later, he takes the time to observe that the family tree of thought patterns precedes the Puritan era, in many cases being traceable as far back as early Christian doctrine and practice. Essentially, he argues that Puritan ideas were themselves not innovations, but rather had their origins in the ancient Christian church. More specifically, he locates Puritan Sabbatarianism as grounded in the beliefs and practices recorded by Athanasius and the Council of Laodicea, fifth-century church-historian Sozomen, and the Celtic church, which depended on Scripture rather than popes and councils for its authority. This desire to return to primitive Christianity's simplicity of practice and purity of doctrine which Ball locates in Puritan attitudes is also part of the rhetoric of Adventism, revealing its Restorationist roots.

Perhaps where Ball is at his weakest is in chapter 16, where he moves from historian to contemporary commentator and even futurist. His brief overview of the history of dominant thought from Greek and Roman times to the present offers a picture of a decline in the fundamentals of Western civilisation to the point of it now being pagan. While he claims that the decline is due to the abandonment of Christianity from its high point in the logo-centric era of the advent of the printing press and Protestantism, his argument in fact begins with the implicit value of Greek logic and Roman law—legacies of pagan societies which he also sees as bedrocks of the heights of Western civilisation. The appeal to pagan Greek and Roman heritage undermines his argument of the centrality of a Christian Western heritage which he sees as in irretrievable decline. This loss, he states, has come through the influences of violent ideologies such as Fascism and Communism and the values-levelling emphasis on multiculturalism, while secular humanism has made autonomous humanity the new centre of attention. The governing metaphor is the multi-medium statue in the prophecy of Daniel 2, where the feet of iron and clay indicate a failure of secular politics and society to provide the necessary unity to ensure a future. In this pessimistic view of the contemporary world, Ball sees hope because these developments are the harbinger of the return of Christ and the establishment of his eternal kingdom.

There is much of merit in Ball's analysis, but what is unsettling is the blending of a Eurocentric with a Christocentric worldview. The relegation of one's traditions and history from the limelight to the footlights is not in itself a sign of end. Ball implies, almost certainly accidentally I believe, that had the West maintained its Christian heritage, the Second Advent would be less necessary or immediate. I share his view of the trajectory of world his-

tory and its imminent conclusion in the triumphant return of Christ, bringing to an end the tragic history of sinful humanity's cruelty and suffering. However, I do not necessarily believe that virtue has resided in Western civilisation and that danger lurks in other cultures. Most societies have been blessed by insight into how to live well in some respects, and cursed by a fatal blindness in many others. The history of the Christian West is shamefully littered with too many examples of unchristian behaviour, even from those professing Christ. Christian doctrine has even been used to justify violence and abuse towards others, Christian and non-Christian alike. In many respects, recent exposure to other cultures has allowed the West to develop greater empathy and reduce bigotry—a move in harmony with the Gospel. And the challenge that 'Present Truth' demands of us living in a less Eurocentric world is to understand the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation according to today's global, rather than yesterday's Euro-American, perspectives.

I do agree with him that the Christian legacy has been a strength of Western civilisation, but that torch has now been passed on to vast numbers in other parts of the world, where Christianity is an increasingly important cultural influence even as it diminishes in the West. The illness of the world at large is not so much an abandonment of Western society as it is a lack of Christian love, on which Western society has had neither monopoly nor mortgage. And so, by a slightly different path, I end up agreeing with Ball—bring on the return of Christ.

This is not to diminish the accomplishments of Ball's scholarly work as historian. Where the bulk of Adventist historians have mostly ploughed the narrow field of the history of the denomination, especially in America, and have published largely within the Adventist press to a parochial audience, Ball's work has broadened the scope of Adventist historical research, has been published primarily through reputable non-denominational scholarly publishers, and has reached a wider scholarly audience. Of course, there are advantages in not researching immediate Adventist history: he has been able to avoid the denominational political controversies that have dogged some of his contemporaries who have produced research that challenged Establishment hagiography.⁵ But his output has also helped to reduce the narrowness of Adventist historical focus. By drawing denominational attention to the Puritan past, he has helped expand an Adventist understanding of its own origins, drawing attention to the doctrinal precedents of Adventism, and blazing a trail for others to tease out the legacies of earlier reformers in the Adventist movement. For example, current research in a better under-

5 Daniel Reynaud and Arthur Patrick, 'Idealisation, Conflict and Maturation: The development of Seventh-day Adventist Historiography.' *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review*, 2:3, June 2011, 11–18.

standing of Adventism's debt to the Seeker network is building and expanding on the foundations that he laid.⁶

His work has provided a necessary filling of gaps in understandings of Puritan thought and influence, and has also proved to be a valuable correction to previous histories that overlooked or underplayed aspects of Puritan theology.⁷ Consequently his writings have received plaudits from academics and his books have received excellent reviews, with only the occasional carping caveat. A reviewer described one of his books as offering 'a detailed and balanced assessment' of Puritan Sabbatarianism, while his study of Puritan mortalism was praised as 'a fascinating study of a neglected minority theological position and the controversy surrounding it.' The reviewer concluded that 'Ball is to be commended for bringing this movement more fully to light, as its witness influenced mainstream Christian thought in significant ways that we may not have previously understood.'⁸

In short, Bryan Ball as historian has been innovative in exploring the origins of Adventist belief through the lens of Puritan thought, belonging to that small group of Adventist historians, mostly of English or European heritage, whose work has been grounded in the European socio-religious context of advocating a minority view in the face of powerful state-endorsed religions. He has been rare among Adventist historians in working in an area of religious history which has attracted the attention of mainstream historians. His work demonstrates both sound scholarship and an ability to frame the potentially dull minutiae of late English Reformation theological hairsplitting in a language that is accessible to a literate laity. His contribution as a scholar is invaluable both to Adventism and to the broader community of historical endeavour.

6 See Garry Duncan, 'Converging edges of the Midnight Cry: A journey of select Seeker and Rogerene descendant faith paths in mid-state Connecticut,' paper presented at *Adventism and Adventist History: Sesquicentennial Reflections*, Silver Spring, MD, January 6, 2014.

7 Bryan W. Ball, *The Seventh-Day Men: Sabbatarians and Sabbatarianism in England and Wales, 1600–1800*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, James Clarke & Co, 2009, 39n; Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers: Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2008), 16–18.

8 W. M. Spellman, review of Bryan W. Ball, *The Seventh-Day Men*. *American Historical Review* 101 (1996) 479; Charles Hambrick-Stowe, review of Bryan W. Ball, *The Soul Sleepers*. *Christian Mortalism from Wycliffe to Priestley*. *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 60 (2009) 167.