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Bullinger's intervention in the Vestiarian controversy of 1566¹

by David Keep

In view of the quatercentenary of the death of Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75) we are specially pleased to be able to publish this paper on his intervention in an English controversy. Dr. Keep, a graduate of the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Sheffield, began to study Bullinger in Zurich in 1962-63 and completed his doctoral dissertation on him at Sheffield under the supervision of Professor G. R. Potter. He is now Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Rolle College of Education, Exmouth. He played a leading part in the organization of the Bullinger Colloquium held in Bristol on September 16th-18th of this year.

THE "godly and learned Bullinger" died on 17 September 1575 as the most senior and respected leader of the reformed churches. His moderation had been crucial in preserving Zwingli's work in Zurich after the military disaster of Kappel in 1531 and he fostered the organization and doctrinal definitions of the Swiss churches, particularly through the two Helvetic Confessions of 1536 and 1566. As schoolmaster at the abbey of Kappel in 1529 he had reformed the community by his preaching and instituted a biblical daily service similar to that adopted by Cranmer for the Church of England. His own published sermons, the *Decades*, were used as theological guides from England to the East Indies and he carried on a prolific correspondence. Since the publication of the four volumes of *Zurich letters*² and the *Decades* by the Parker Society in the nineteenth century his influence in England has been almost universally acknowledged, but rarely analysed. The vestiarian controversy of 1566 has frequently been studied,³ but never from an exclusively Zurich standpoint. This paper aims to present familiar evidence from a different perspective, and to make some attempt to estimate the importance of Bullingers' contribution.

The controversy of 1566 arose from Archbishop Parker's *Advertisements*, which sought to impose a limited conformity of dress

- 1 This paper is based on part of a dissertation submitted to the University of Sheffield in June 1970.
- 2 *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation* (Cambridge 1846-7) and *The Zurich Letters* (ZL) i (1842), ii (1845).
- 3 John H. Primus *The Vestments Controversy* (Kampen, Netherlands, 1960); Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967).

on Anglican clergy. This was at the request, but not technically with the authority of the queen. It was opposed by a small group of scholars exiled under Mary, including Turner, the botanist Dean of Wells, Thomas Sampson, Dean of Christchurch, and Lawrence Humphrey, President of Magdalen. Their influence was likely to spread through their students at Oxford, while Cambridge was potentially even more puritan. Humphrey and Sampson had both been exiles in Zurich, though Bullinger considered the latter "of a captious and unquiet disposition". He expressed impatience with non-conformists in his letter to Beza of 15 March 1567: "England has many characters of this sort, who cannot be at rest, who can never be satisfied, and who always have something or other to complain about".⁴ He had more confidence in his other guests, who occupied the sees of Coventry and Lichfield, Winchester, Salisbury, Norwich and Worcester. These were supporters of Parker, and all were reformed and "puritan" in theology. They wrote to Bullinger about the state of the church. The publication of a copy of a long letter to the Oxford dissidents involved him in the dispute at its height, and possibly helped to reduce the potential secession from the church. The whole issue depended on whether clerical dress was a matter of doctrine or discipline. The more conservative reformed Anglicans saw this as a matter of order and decency; the radicals saw in it the restoration of sacerdotalism.

The Zurich church had been aware of this problem in England from 1559. Jewel wrote to Peter Martyr:

As to what you write concerning religion, and the theatrical habits, I heartily wish it could be accomplished. We on our parts have not been wanting to so good a cause. But those persons who have taken such delight in these matters, have followed, I believe, the ignorance of the priests; whom, when they found them to be no better than mere logs of wood, without talent, or learning, or morality, they were willing at least to commend to the people by that comical dress.⁵

Two months later Sampson wrote describing the use of candles, crucifix and vestments in the royal chapel,⁶ and on 10 July 1560 Thomas Lever, the public preacher at Coventry, wrote to Bullinger at length describing how many clergy were resuming distinctive dress, though only one per cent of them were fit to preach.⁷ Jewel expressed the same dislike of the surplice in his letter to Martyr of 7 February 1562, but gave a far more hopeful view of religion in England.⁸

⁴ ZL ii, 152.

⁵ ZL i, 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 62-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99-103.

Humphrey took a much less optimistic view when he wrote fifteen months later, though he still expected victory. He made it clear that Bullinger had already sent his opinion, in a letter lost to us.⁹ He realized that the real issue was about who had the power to settle ecclesiastical affairs.

Not all Bullinger's friends considered that conflict was likely. Jewel in Wiltshire continued to assure him that all was well. On 1 March 1565 he wrote that "by the blessing of our great and good God, all things are settled with us in the matters of religion."¹⁰ Sandys from Worcester expressed the same hope on 3 January 1566;¹¹ Jewel wrote again on 8 February with a little less confidence:

The contest respecting the linen surplice, about which I doubt not you have heard either from our friend Abel or Parkhurst, is not yet at rest. That matter still somewhat disturbs weak minds. And I wish that all, even the slightest vestiges of popery might be removed from our churches, and above all from our minds. But the queen at this time is unable to endure the least alteration of religion.¹²

While the west country bishops thought that the question of dress would settle itself, Horn wrote to Gualther from his palace at Farnham in Surrey claiming that the dispute over caps and surplices was giving hope and strength to catholic leaders who would use the division within Anglicanism to recover their power.¹³ Fear of further national, or royal, apostasy was probably the strongest motive keeping the returned exiles in their sees. They realized the complexity of Elizabeth's will and intentions, and knew she must not be pressed too hard. Sampson and his friends were willing to risk the established protestant cause in order to fight for the purity of religion and the freedom of the church to settle its own affairs.

On 9 February 1566 Humphrey sent to Bullinger the six questions which are set out and answered in the first part of his reply. The letter began with thanks for the Swiss pastor's "lucubrations on Daniel," and suggested an addition:

In the third chapter, where the prophet is discoursing about ornaments and female attire, should you think fit to insert anything respecting this affair of the habits, it would in my opinion be worth your while. I am not ignorant of what you have already written; but you seem to have expressed your sentiments too briefly, and without sufficient perspicuity.¹⁴

A week later Sampson wrote from London with his twelve questions. He regarded Parker's rules as a positive threat of Romanism, worse than under Edward VI:

⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138-9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, 148-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 142-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-2.

Here many pious men are hesitating; for the sake of whom I again ask it as a favour from you, that, having well considered that matter with master Gualther, and the rest of your colleagues, with your wonted piety, you will plainly state your opinion, and send a written answer to each of the above questions.¹⁵

Bullinger received this letter on 26 April. There was no need for fresh consultation and he replied on 1 May, sending copies to Horn to forward to Parkhurst, Jewel, Sandys and Pilkington. His covering letter was dated 3 May:

We send our letter on the vestiarian controversy, written by us to the learned men, and our honoured godly brethren, N. and M. And we send it to you on this account, that ye may understand that we would not have any private communication with the brethren, without the knowledge of you, the principal ministers; and that in all things we seek the peace of your churches according to our power.¹⁶

Probably by chance Bullinger's reply had not reached Oxford in July, whereas Parkhurst's letter of 21 August indicated that he had received a printed text by early June.¹⁷ By the same post Grindal wrote to explain how he had been shown it, and to justify publication:

It is scarcely credible how much this controversy about things of no importance has disturbed our churches, and still in great measures continues to do. Many of the more learned clergy seemed to be on the point of forsaking their ministry. Many of the people also had it in contemplation to withdraw from us, and set up in private meetings; but however most of them, through the mercy of the Lord, have now returned to a better mind. Your letter, replete with piety and wisdom, has greatly contributed to this result; for I have taken care that it should be printed, both in Latin and English. Some of the clergy influenced by your judgement and authority, have relinquished their former intention of deserting their ministry.

Grindal assured Bullinger that the queen would be reconciled with Humphrey and Sampson if they conformed, as the former eventually did. The bishops, who welcomed the new second Helvetic confession would not desert the church for the sake of a few ceremonies.¹⁸

I should like other evidence to justify Grindal's claim that ministers had remained in the church because of Bullinger's letter. The tract had been in circulation for only two or three months. On 26 March thirty-seven clergy were suspended for nonconformity. By July only eight incumbents, three lecturers and three or four curates were obdurate. Parker himself may have been the author of a similar tract *A briefe examination . . . of a certaine declaration*, and there had been several from the radical side.¹⁹ Certainly Bullinger's influence over those who had visited him in exile, and (more important) those

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 154-5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 356.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 157 and 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 168-9.

¹⁹ Collinson, 76-8 and 82.

who worked under them, was considerable. John Whitgift had become chaplain to Cox at Ely in 1560, and would have been aware of the correspondence with Zurich. Whitgift was Dean of Lincoln when Cooper introduced the *Decades* as a text book about 1573. It is difficult to move away from the evidence of texts, but there are clues that students and younger clergy who might have seceded in 1566 were persuaded to stay in their cures.

To a large extent this is the end of the story, though a great deal of ink was still to flow in countercharge and recrimination. Bullinger had been made the bishops' unwilling, but highly effective advocate, and there was no schism in the church of England. Later events were to show that Grindal was too puritan for Elizabeth, but on the vestiarian issue he was firm. It remains to this paper to look at the editions of Bullinger's tract, the contents and briefly, the repercussions.

The tract was printed by William Seres of Paul's churchyard, partner to the famous John Day. The Latin text took eight sheets, and the English fourteen. There are two copies in the Bodleian, one bound with the Latin, one with other theological tracts, which indicates that they were sold separately. A third version is interesting as it is part of an anthology entitled *Whether it be mortall sinne to transgresse ciuill lawes which be the commaundementes of ciuill magistrates, The judgement of Philip Melancton in his Epitome of Morall Philosophie. The resolution of D. Hen. Bullinger and D. Rod. Gualter, of D. Martin Bucer, and D. Peter Martyr concernyng thapparel of Ministers, and other indifferent things*.²⁰ The questions are printed in roman text, and Bullinger's replies in gothic. There is no imprint, though someone has annotated the title-page "1566". Emden has been suggested as the place of publication, but this was a centre of puritan printing and would imply an anti-government attitude. Humphrey and Sampson hinted at other works, and the preface to the English edition cited then, but in my view this printing looks like a continental pirate collection of tracts, later than Seres' print. Bullinger's tract was printed as an appendix to the 1587 edition of the *Decades*, and in the Parker Society correspondence.²¹

Bullinger discussed the eighteen questions posed by the two radicals, but as he stressed, these covered the same ground. The problem was whether ministers ought to be distinguished from the laity by a round or square cap and a surplice. Bullinger interpreted the legislation as a question of decency and order: "there is an ambiguity in the word *ought*, for if it is taken as implying what is necessary

²⁰ *Heinrich Bullinger Bibliographie* i (Zurich, 1972), nos. 553-5. 554 is the text not recorded by Pollard-Redgrave, and should probably follow 555.

²¹ *Bibliographie* no. 556/220; ZL i, 345-55.

to salvation, I do not think that even the authors of the laws themselves intend such an interpretation". He criticized the association of the dress with Jews or papists and pointed out that some ministers of the primitive church wore vestments, including the apostle John. The question of Christian liberty was quite distinct and had no precedent in the political system of Israel, which was to Bullinger the model for the protestant state.

It appears indeed most extraordinary to me . . . that you can persuade yourselves that you cannot with a safe conscience, subject yourselves and churches to vestiarian bondage; and that you do not rather consider, to what kind of bondage you will subject yourselves and churches, if you refuse to comply with a civil ordinance, which is a matter of indifference.

Bullinger was not averse to adding ceremonies to those in the Bible, provided they were not in contradiction. Offence to individuals was not sufficient case, and church buildings, baptism, the creeds and the Lord's Prayer might be criticized on the same grounds as vestments. Bullinger conceded that a bondage was being put on ministers, but concluded: "but I will not allow, and this for most just reasons, that their station or ministry is on that account to be deserted, and their place given to wolves, as was before observed, or to ministers less qualified than themselves".²² This tract, like the sermons on the Magistrate, makes crystal clear Bullinger's view of the church. He was the father of what was to be called erastianism, provided the ruling power did not contradict the scripture.

The repercussions of the publication of this tract strained Bullinger's friendships in England on both sides of the dispute. Bullinger first heard of Grindal's action from Dean Turner, who wrote on 23 July casting aspersions on Bullinger's integrity and soundness of doctrine.²³ The issue became blurred as post followed post, sometimes via Geneva, and as eventually the radicals sent a deputation under Percival Wiburn to the reformed churches. What was not clear to the Swiss—and possibly also to many Anglicans—was the true position in the Church of England. Instances of Roman practice were quoted, but not legislation to support them.²⁴ Bullinger was annoyed and Wiburn took back four letters from the antistes and his son-in-law, Gualther. The last of these appeared as an appendix to *An admonition to the Parliament* in 1572 and provoked a further misunderstanding.²⁵

Before considering in more detail the letters from Zurich to England, it is interesting to look at Gualter's reply to Beza on his

²² *Ibid.*, 346; 349; 354.

²³ ZL ii, 124-6.

²⁴ *The state of the Church of England as described by Perceval Wiburn*, ZL ii, 358-62.

²⁵ ZL i, 357-60; ii, 136-7; i, 137-40; 140-2.

own and Bullinger's behalf, also written on 11 September. He explained why they had thought it right for the English to conform over vestments, and expressed sorrow that the matter had led to evictions rather than being settled by discussion. He would have liked to revisit England but feared it was too late to influence the queen. The radicals were no longer open to modify their views. He and Bullinger had written to both parties, hoping for help from Parkhurst and Pilkington who had not evicted anyone, and from the Earl of Bedford. They agreed with Beza's criticism of the reported measures, but held to their opinion if it were a matter of vestments only.

Thus, my honoured brother, have I replied to your letter, not so much in my own name as in that of my esteemed father, master Bullinger. And though the danger be indeed evident, yet we trust in the Lord, who will preserve his remnant even in that realm, out of which he will some time or other restore a purer and godlier church.²⁶

Although Bullinger's letter of rebuke to the bishops is the most germane to the discussion, it will be convenient to consider first the other three letters of 6-11 September, as they were not followed by replies. The briefest was an apology to the venerable puritan leader and former bishop of Exeter, Miles Coverdale. This is the only extant letter between the theologian and his one-time translator, and was in reply to a round-robin from Coverdale with Humphrey and Sampson to "William Farell, Peter Viret, Theodore Beza and others" in Geneva which must have been passed on to Bullinger, probably via Wiburton.²⁷ This presented the position starkly, and asked whether Bullinger thought that puritanical ministers should stay in office despite the bishops' action. He replied that they should. Now his words were being misused, he was intending to write to persons of influence to check this and preserve the purity of the churches.

The reply to Humphrey and Sampson was terser. Bullinger had foreseen that they would not be satisfied, but in reply to their complaints he wrote:

To these remarks we are neither able nor inclined to make any addition. We might indeed answer your objections, but we are unwilling to give occasion to contention by a renewed and interminable discussion.

They should act for the advantage of the church. Even though his letter was published, Bullinger hoped it would not be misused.²⁸

The Swiss also wrote to the Earl of Bedford to enlist his further support for a sound church and his help to the evicted ministers. Their longest letter was to Grindal and Horn endorsing their views on dress, but disapproving of reported new articles restoring chanting, organs, and unacceptable baptismal procedure. The puritan

²⁶ ZL ii, 142-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-4.

²⁸ ZL i, 360-1.

envoys had overstated and failed to distinguish new laws from long established traditions. In their reply of 6 February 1567 Grindal and Horn were able to reassure their friends that only the "morose" had been dismissed, and that there was no other issue than vestments involved.²⁹ Here the matter closed for Grindal and he did not refer to it again. Jewel wrote less optimistically from his sickbed: "they will neither be persuaded by the very learned writings of either yourself or Gualther, or by the counsels of other pious men."³⁰ The last word by Bullinger was to John Bartlett and George Withers who visited Zurich in the summer of 1567. Bullinger and Gualther read to them the letter from Grindal and Horn. They attempted a detailed reply,³¹ but no comment from Bullinger has survived. His experience with the English radicals seems to have confirmed his view that the bishops were more sinned against than sinning!

The conflict over the two issues of the form of worship and the freedom of the ministers never dies down fully. Pilkington described the dispute over *A proclamation against the despair of breakers of the orders prescribed in the book of common prayer by the queen in 1573*,³² but this time the Swiss only listened. Bullinger's works were republished in the nineteenth century, possibly at the instigation of G. C. Gorham,³³ at a time when evangelicals were preparing to invoke the power of the Crown against ritualism. In the context of 1566, however, Bullinger's tract may have been crucial, as Grindal suggested. Men remembered the exile and the personal influence of Bullinger was considerable. He was the champion of unity and conformity, whereas the Genevans were inclined to offend the Queen. It was tragic for the Church of England that his views and writings were forgotten within twenty years of his death.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

³¹ ZL ii, 150-1.

³² Cardwell, *Documentary Annals* (Oxford, 1849), i, 349; ZL i, 287.

³³ Walter Hollweg, *Heinrich Bullingers Hausbuch* (Neukirchen, 1956), 171-8.