



Abstract from Article

THE COVENANT IDEA AS A REVOLUTIONARY SYMBOL: SCOTLAND, 1596-1637

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Abstract

I should like to call attention once again to the old home truth that ideas, while they may not be completely independent of their environment, are still possessed of a heredity of their own that can and often does transform the material circumstances of man and affect the course of history. I have chosen for purposes of illustration the covenant or federal theological conception, which worked a powerful influence in Scottish society during the early decades of the seventeenth century and which, in turn, was peculiarly influenced and reshaped by that society until it evolved into a symbol for the revolution which terminated in the overthrow of the monarchy of Charles I. In brief, it is my conviction that this rebellion against Charles and his government was primarily and mainly, though not solely, the result of a religious ferment that had been brewing for forty years. To those who know something of the history of Scottish Presbyterianism or of the Covenanting period in Scottish history this may not seem a particularly surprising conclusion. The religious bases of the Scottish uprising against Charles I have always seemed so self-evident as to require no defence. And yet, just as it is a fashionable tendency among some scholars at the moment to play down the element of religion as a cause of the English Civil Wars so it has become fashionable to argue that the revolt of Presbyterian Scotland was, in reality, caused by a number of discontents for which the religious issue was only a cloak. Now, there is no denying, as I have already suggested, that this upheaval was the result of tensions not all of which were religious in nature. The Scottish nobility, gentry, and merchants had specific grievances, both economic and political, against the king. On the other hand, neither can it be denied that the form taken by the rebellion, the language of the revolutionary manifestoes, and the symbolic conception expressed in the National Covenant of 1638, all indicate how comprehensive the cause of religion was. Indeed, it was the one cause that gave unity and popular strength to the movement. It is, after all, significant that whether all those who rebelled against the king were truly religious or no they at least formally recognized the need to express their dissatisfaction in religious terms. In that sense we must agree that the operating ideals of Scottish society were derived from a widely accepted belief that religion was something important enough to most Scotsmen to justify the extremity of rebellion. To understand how it was that religious discontent and the symbolism of a theological conception were able to make a revolution, we must look backward from the year 1637, when rebellion against the king first began, across a period of about forty years during which the minds of Scotsmen were being prepared for this eventuality. In the development of the revolutionary symbolism it cannot, of course, be claimed that ideas alone played a decisive part. The National Covenant was more than the creation of pure theology. It was also the product of a long-standing indigenous tradition which in the years between 1596 and 1637 was slowly and almost unconsciously assimilated into the covenant theological scheme with such thoroughness that the product of this fusion became something so apparently Scottish as to cause its foreign origins to be forgotten.

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