The struggle for Protestant identity in seventeenth-century England: 'Catholic' pictures and Protestant buyers

Seanine Warrington

2003

Illumine: Journal of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society

UVic Libraries ePublishing Services

Original citation:
Warrington, S. (2003). The struggle for Protestant identity in seventeenth-century England: 'Catholic' pictures and Protestant buyers. *Illumine, 2*(1), 3–8.
https://doi.org/10.18357/illumine2120031567

The Struggle for Protestant Identity in Seventeenth Century England: 'Catholic' Pictures and Protestant Buyers

Seanine Warrington, University of Victoria

Abstract

Religious art was proudly supported by Anglicans after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 for its ability to connect both the early and Medieval churches with the Church of England, and, more importantly, to demonstrate the Anglican's rejection of the increasingly powerful dissenting perspective. Because nonconformist challenges to the Church's authority were often framed around the issue of religious imagery, art became a focal point for a power struggle between two Protestant groups: the Anglicans and the Puritans. Taking a defensive stance on the use of religious imagery, the late seventeenth-century Anglican Church promoted religious art on a large scale, both for church and household worship. As a symbol of their loyalty to the Church of England, Anglican laity brought pictures featuring Biblical and hagiographic imagery into their homes for both instructional and devotional purposes. These images, purchased at London auction houses, reflect how the middle levels of lay society enthusiastically embraced religious iconography and indicate the self-conscious identity of Anglicanism in the midst of Protestant conflict and division. The question of the presence of 'Catholic' images in Protestant English homes goes beyond simple decoration—religious imagery became a symbol of one's religious sentiments.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 marks England's decisive rejection of Catholicism in favour of a national Protestant religion. This official commitment to Protestantism was to bring stability and contentment to the majority of English people, however, the period following the Revolution was marked by religious tensions. Factional strife within the Church of England bled into society and although there was a heightened mistrust of Catholicism, pictures featuring what can typically be called 'Catholic' subject matter were among the most popular items sold at London auction houses at that time. This paper examines the seeming anomaly of 'Catholic' pictures in English Protestant homes and through investigating the politico-religious context, I conclude that Biblical and hagiographic imagery found in middle class homes articulated religious and political differences that were forged in the conflict between Protestant factions after the Glorious Revolution.

Picture auction sales in London were extremely popular in the years following the Revolution. Current scholars, such as Iain Pears, have traced the development of a permanent commercial art market in London from 1680 to 1760. He states that throughout the 1680s, more than four hundred art auctions took place in London and by 1691, the number increased; in that year alone, London hosted ninety-nine sales.[1] Clearly, art was of major interest to many Londoners by the end of that century. In my study of sixteen auction catalogues which represent some of the largest auction sales held during these two years, I examined eight catalogues from 1689 and eight from 1690, and classified the types of images according to their descriptive titles since the pictures are no longer in existence. I determined that twelve per cent of the paintings listed for sale were of a religious nature and featured saints as well as Old and New Testament stories and figures. This casts religious subject matter as a significant focus of attraction for London consumers. Given the fact that early modern and current accounts of this century indicate that any Catholic influence on English life was perceived as a threat to the spiritual and political health of the nation, the popularity of these images poses an interesting question; why are pictures featuring Catholic subject matter being purchased and how are they being used within buyers' homes?

Current scholarship offers a convincing picture of the consumer patterns around these London auction sales. In the essay 'Picture Consumption in London at the End of the Seventeenth Century,' Carol Gibson-Wood's study of both probate and orphan's court inventories between the early 1690s and the early eighteenth century indicates that many middle class Londoners owned the type of pictures that would be found at the auction sales. Of the one hundred middle class households that she looked at,

[1] Iain Pears, *The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England 1680-1768* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 51-59.

including those of merchants, shopkeepers, tradesmen, artisans, and professionals, sixty-two record ownership of pictures. Furthermore, their average value listed in inventories was approximately ten shillings—a price which corresponds with those at the auction sales. Possessing a similar value to such items as petticoats and pewter dishes, these pictures can be interpreted as affordable luxuries of the time that were likely used to decorate homes.[2] However, the consistent appearance of what is considered 'Catholic' imagery at London auction sales presents a challenge to current conceptions of England during the Glorious Revolution and the following years. Although there are no known surviving examples of these pictures, the descriptive titles used in auction catalogues such as *Virgin and Child* and *Our Savior on the Cross* suggest that religious art followed the subject matter and iconography of the Catholic artistic tradition despite the threat Catholicism posed.

England, in the seventeenth century, was marked by religious conflict and debate. During the Civil War of 1642 to 1649, royalists fought to preserve the Church of England against the Puritans whose dissatisfaction with the church was expressed through violent iconoclasm. Under Oliver Cromwell (1649-1658) the Protectorate government granted religious toleration to many Protestant dissenting groups who were known as the Puritans.[3] Puritanism was largely informed by the teachings of reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) who asserted that scripture represented the only authority in Christian faith. This prompted a call for the "purification" of the church: all ceremonies not advocated in the Bible were to be eradicated from worship. In particular, Puritans rejected ceremonial vestments and the preparation of communion on an altar, as well as the use of the cross and religious imagery in worship, which were considered to be both a form of idolatry and a challenge to the ultimate authority of the Bible.

While Puritans regarded the use of images as one of the most objectionable practices in both the Catholic and Anglican churches, they also condemned the Church of England for practicing what they considered to be popish ceremony. Traditionally, the term popery described the power of the Pope and of Roman Catholic practices, but by the seventeenth century it was identified with the arbitrary or autocratic government, which early modern English people associated with the Catholic monarchies on the continent.[4] For instance, Charles I's government embodied the threat of popery because of its despotic style and its alliance with Catholic France. Popery, therefore, signaled foreign invasion and the possibility of religious persecution of Protestants. During the 1660s-70s, Charles II's alliance with France's Catholic King Louis XIV drew England closer to the possibility of the arbitrary Catholic rule which many Protestants feared.[5] When the heir to the throne, James II, openly converted to Catholicism in 1669, some anti-royalist members of the government quickly took measures against the likelihood of a future Catholic rulership. This resulted in The Exclusion Crisis of 1679 to 1681, which was intended to exclude James from the throne on the basis of his Catholicism.[6] Despite this measure, he ascended to the throne in 1685 and began making adjustments to legally allow Catholic worship in England. In 1687, he issued a Declaration of Indulgence allowing for both freedom of worship and access to public office for Catholics and Protestant dissenters.[7] He further communicated his Catholic loyalties to the nation by imprisoning seven Anglican bishops who refused to adhere to the 1688 Declaration of Indulgence. Both the Church and government began to challenge James as he took measures to increase the number of Catholic Members of Parliament. In 1688, a group of aristocrats and one bishop wrote a letter to Protestant Stadholder of the Netherlands, William of Orange, requesting that he invade England and restore Protestantism. William's arrival in England in 1688 was termed the Glorious Revolution. It is not surprising that William initially received much English support for his efforts to preserve

[2] Carol Gibson-Wood, 'Picture Consumption in London at the End of the Seventeenth Century,' *Art Bulletin*, vol. 84, no. 3 (2002), p. 491.

[3] Alan Smith, *The Emergence of a Nation State: The Commonwealth of England, 1539-1660* (London: Longman, 1984) p. 342.

[4] Geoffrey Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660-1722* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 121.

[5] In 1660, Charles II restored the English monarchy and, along with it, the Anglican state church. His Catholic sympathies however, were widely known. When he began to form a political alliance with Catholic King Louis XIV, many English Protestants feared inevitable Catholic rule. See Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power: Late Stuart and Early Georgian Britain, 1660-1722*, p. 122.

[6] Holmes, *The Making of a Great Power,* p. 124.

[7] Craig Rose, *England in the 1690s: Revolution, Religion and War* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 2.

Protestantism in England, as indicated by the majority of government, church, and lay people acknowledging his new authority over English ecclesiastical and political matters. Further, anti-Catholic riots in London upon William's arrival attest to the fact that Protestant sentiment dominated popular opinion.[8] Many believed he would put an end to the threat of popery, but shortly after he took the throne the unified Protestant approval of the Glorious Revolution began to crumble with much of the opposition to William's ascendancy located within the Church. Many of the clergy would not swear the oath of allegiance to William, and those who regarded their oath to King James II as life long were pitted against the jurors who favoured William. Ultimately, the nonjurors lost their dioceses. The appointment of dissenting clergymen as replacements for the nonjurors revealed William's support of nonconformist rather than Anglican Protestants. Thus, both a schism within the Church of England and a rift between William and Anglicanism was created.

William's Calvinist background was a guiding force in his dealings with Church politics. This resulted in tensions being felt within the Church of England as well as the expansion and creation of divisions outside of it. In 1689, William introduced the Comprehension and the Indulgence Bills which invited moderate dissenters to become part of the state-supported Church of England. Nonconformists who did not fall into the moderate group were called non-Trinitarians since they did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity; they were protected by the Act of Indulgence. Even more radical was William's hope to repeal the Test Act, which allowed dissenting Protestants to hold office despite their refusal to take the Anglican sacrament of the Eucharist. Tories, or High Churchmen, who were pro-royalist and conservative regarding changes within the Church of England, rejected these proposals. Although they prevented the Comprehension Bill and the repeal of the Test Act from following through, they conceded to passing the Act of Indulgence.[9] William not only protected the dissenters from being punished for worshipping outside of the Church of England, but also allowed them to acquire licenses to build meeting houses. As early as 1690, there were 940 dissenting congregations (excluding Quaker meeting houses) in England. By 1711, the number of meeting houses outnumbered Anglican churches by two to one. Between these years, approximately 4,000 new licenses had been issued.[10]

The matter of religious art in Christian worship became increasingly controversial after the Glorious Revolution. Looking back to the Civil War period, iconoclasm allowed dissenters to exert their power over the Church based on what they believed were commonalities between the Anglican and Catholic religions in relation to imagery and its uses. Protestant dissenters believed that religious images were heretical and hoped "to demolish such old monuments of superstition and idolatry."[11] With this as a backdrop, the Church of England's decision to rebuild and redecorate St. Paul's Cathedral reemerged as a hotly contested point between Anglicans and dissenters. It began earlier in the century, during Charles I's reign (1625-1649) when Puritans repeatedly protested the court's and clergy's desire to refurbish the building.[12] From their perspective, a church was a purely functional building necessary only for worship, and as such, one which did not require embellishment. As decisions about the re-adornment of St. Paul's Cathedral were being made, theological questions regarding the interior decoration of the cupola moved to the forefront of the controversy. Some members of the clergy, especially those with dissenting sympathies, feared that St. Paul's decoration would echo the Catholic counter-reformation churches on the continent, which featured brightly coloured dramatic depictions of saints. While Protestants did not attach a divine status to saints like the Catholics, many Puritans rejected the representation of saints because it was part of the Catholic tradition. However, in 1709, the decision was reached that the cupola should depict figures from scriptural history, specifically from the Acts of the Apostles. The clergy consented since the imagery would be didactic rather than awe inspiring. Representing the church's namesake, St. Paul was an obvious subject matter choice for the decorative scheme; as well, this apostle was particularly important to Protestantism for his emphasis on faith alone as the key to salvation. The Commissioners for the Rebuilding of St. Paul's Cathedral specified representing the *earthly* rather than the *otherworldly* life of St. Paul.

[8] Rose, *England in the 1690s*, pp. 7-9.
[9] Ibid, pp. 157-165.
[10] Holmes, *Politics, Religion and Society in England,* p. 193.
[11] Ibid, p. 146.
[12] Judith Hook, *The Baroque Age in England* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 146.

In this way his life as a man, rather than as a saint, would be stressed, which would inhibit utilising the images in a way that was idolatrous.[13]

The controversy surrounding the decoration of St. Paul's cupola demonstrates how religious art was both a politically and spiritually-loaded endeavour. As indicated by numerous seventeenth-century books against the use of religious imagery in churches, authors such as Thomas Comber responded to the ongoing criticism of redecorating the Cathedral. In *A Discourse Concerning the Second Council of Nice* (1688), Comber looks back to the Council of Nicaea in 787 when, according to the author, idolatry was sanctioned. Challenging the legitimacy of the Council altogether, Comber writes: "…as for this *Nicene* Council, they can neither confute their Adversaries by Scripture, nor yet by the Councils, Fathers and Tradition, and were better at an Anathema than an Argument."[14] The first commandment in the Old Testament, "Thou shalt not have false gods before me", was often cited as the ultimate statement against religious imagery thus condemning any early Church doctrine which argued the contrary. Comber adheres to this precedent when he states, "The Religious Veneration which is now by the *Roman* Church said to be due to Images, cannot be grounded upon Scripture, because it was expressly forbid in the Old Testament."[15] From this perspective, images of saints and Biblical figures would bring the sins of Roman Catholicism into Protestant churches.

Many Puritans, like Comber, also condemned the display of religious imagery in the domestic realm. From this perspective, it seems likely that Roman Catholics would be the sole audience for images purchased at London auction houses. However, seventeenth-century statistics record that less than two per cent of England's population was Catholic during the 1690s, making this an unsatisfactory explanation.[16] Since the statistics do not support a large Catholic purchasing market, it is necessary to turn our attention back to the Protestant population for a deeper analysis. Is it possible that dissenters now formed the menace that Catholics once posed to the Church of England? If one uses the case of St. Paul's Cathedral, which seems to encapsulate the conflict between Anglicans and dissenters, a division between the Church of England and nonconformists was already under way. According to Restoration scholar Judith Hook, this conflict forced the Anglican Church to publicly express a strong support for religious imagery, as seen in the redecoration of the Cathedral.[17] This position further alienated dissenters. By continuing to promote religious imagery, despite opposition from dissenters, the Church of England cultivated a distinctly Anglican interest in Biblical and hagiographic pictures, such as those found at London auction sales. For this reason, we may assume that a large number of consumers who purchased religious imagery at these London sales held Anglican loyalties. Religious pictures bought at auctions and displayed in homes thus functioned to illustrate the household's politico-religious affiliation.

The Anglican acceptance of religious art can be seen in theological literature of the time. In *Concerning Images and Idolatry* (1689), the proctor and writer Abraham Woodhead presents a defensive position on the use of images in the Anglican Church. He lists the Anglican practices of bowing, kneeling, taking the Eucharist, burning frankincense and kissing the Gospels, among other ceremonies, as proper for "a true Son of the Church of *England.*"[18] Woodhead condones Anglican ceremonies, and clearly supports the use of religious art by turning to the early church's application and justification of using religious images: "If then, I say, this Veneration of Holy Relicks and the Cross which is found in the fourth Age, or ancienter, be conceded anyway lawful, or justifiable, then the same and no greater given in whatever following age to Images can never be Idolatrous."[19]

While *Concerning Images and Idolatry* reveals Woodhead's desire to establish support for the proper use of religious imagery, a contrasting point of view is set out by John Gother in *A Discourse of the Use of Images: In Relation to the Church of England and the Church of Rome* (1687). Gother's dissenting sympathies are evident as he draws many parallels between the two churches in relation to the issue of religious imagery. He states that "The Church of *England* likewise agrees with her [Church

[13] Carol Gibson-Wood, 'The Political Background to Thornhill's Paintings in St. Paul's Cathedral,' *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes,* vol. 56 (1993), pp. 233-236.
[14] Thomas Comber, *A Discourse Concerning the Second Council of Nice* (London, 1688), p. 34.
[15] Ibid., preface.
[16] Rose, *England in the 1690s: Revolution, Religion and War,* p. 2.
[17] Hook, *The Baroque Age in England*, p. 146.
[18] Abraham Woodhead, *Concerning Images and Idolatry* (London, 1689), p. 77.
[19] Ibid., p. 74.

of Rome] in the same *Doctrin* and *Practice*; allowing of *Images*, as helps to Piety, and for affecting the minds of the Beholders with Pious Cognitions, and encouraging them to a Vertuous and Exemplary Life."[20] By casting the Church of England in the same light as the Church of Rome, the author hopes to not only implicate Anglicans as promoters of popery but to also accuse the Anglican church of practicing Catholic 'heresy,' including idolatry. Gother associates Anglicanism with religious imagery, not only in the realm of the Church, but also in private households. Quoting an unnamed author, he asserts: "The Pictures of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the Saints may be made, and had in Houses, set up in Churches—The Protestants do it, and use them for Helps of Piety."[21]

While religious images such as those found in auction houses may have served both decorative and devotional needs within the realm of the Anglican home, current scholars like Jeremy Gregory support the idea of an increasing Anglican interest in religious art for educational and commemorative purposes. He believes that art was championed by the clergy within both the church and the domestic sphere; it could instruct the laity in their piety as well as in the value of Christian charity.[22] Gregory highlights the Anglican favour toward Biblical imagery specifically for its ability to educate. As visual narratives, images could illustrate and commemorate events from scriptural history, rather than inspire adoration or idolatry. According to Gregory, the Church of England believed that Biblical imagery used in a didactic fashion would prevent idolatry and gain the support of those possessing nonconformist sympathies.

Like Gregory, Jonathan Barry's 'Cultural Patronage and the Anglican Crisis, 1689-1775' (1993) sees the rising interest in religious prints and pictures around the turn of the century as part of this new interest in household worship among Anglican Protestants.[23] This was the result of the increasing popularity of illustrated devotional books at the end of the seventeenth century which went hand in hand with the flourishing of church building and decoration in the early eighteenth century. He cites as an example the Commission For Building Fifty New Churches in London, which was set up by Parliament in 1711. In response to London's population increase, many of these churches were built in the quickly developing suburbs.[24] The extensive painting and sculptural decoration of these new churches, however, suggest that factors other than demographic considerations fueled the building project. Imagery often associated with Catholic practices played a significant role in their decoration and in Anglican worship. Both Gregory and Barry advocate that the Church of England, wanting to assert power, played a key role in the design and decoration of the new churches. Strategically, the Church harkened back to the practices of the early and Medieval churches to legitimate the depiction of saints and other religious figures based on the authority of its connection to the early church. In this way, the Church of England articulated a clear position on the use of religious imagery for Anglican worship in response to the ongoing conflict.[25] Although they tended to avoid mirroring the elaborate ornamentation of the Catholics, the Anglican clergy, unlike Puritan groups, remained favourable to religious art that could instruct the laity in Christian piety.

In conclusion, we return to the question of 'Catholic' pictures and Protestant buyers. Barry and Gregory provide a framework within which to position middle class consumption of Biblical and hagiographic imagery purchased at London auction houses. From their findings, it can be assumed that Anglicans were purchasing religious images at London auction sales for both devotional and instructional purposes. While such purchases may indicate both the affluence and a particular taste of the middle class, these acquisitions also identified the consumer's Anglican loyalties. Indeed, the subject matter of religious pictures, which included saints, Crucifixions, Old and New Testament stories, and figures, echoes the decorative programs of Anglican churches at the time. In this way, the types

[20] John Gother, *A Discourse of the Use of Images: In Relation to the Church of England and the Church of Rome* (London, 1687), p. 7.

[21] Ibid., p. 8.

[22] Jeremy Gregory, 'Anglicanism and the Arts: religion, culture and politics in the eighteenth century,' pp. 82-109 in Jeremy Black and Jeremy Gregory, eds., *Culture, Politics, and Society in Britain, 1660-1800* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 87.

[23] Jonathan Barry, 'Cultural Patronage and the Anglican Crisis: Bristol, 1689-1775,' pp. 191-208 in Colin Haydon, Stephen Taylor, and John Walsh, eds., *The Church of England c. 1689-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 195.

[24] W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 200-201.

[25] Hook, *The Baroque Age in England*, p. 146.

of images that decorated households articulated religious difference: Anglicanism was aligned with religious art while Protestant nonconformity was associated with the rejection of such imagery as idolatrous. This raises an interesting point; did the threat of dissent during William's reign encourage the Church of England to support their position on religious imagery more strongly than in previous times? Perhaps Anglicans, both clergy and laity, accepted religious imagery as a means of announcing their Anglican loyalties and their rejection of dissent. The popularity of Biblical and hagiographic pictures at London auction sales may be interpreted as belonging to—and illustrating—the religious tensions at the time between the Anglicans and the dissenters.