

A Third Way: Recent Interpretations of Protestantism's Role in English National Identity in the Eighteenth-Century

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If national identity is a sociological construct, then what role did Protestantism play in the formation of English identity during the Eighteenth-century? This paper surveys the scholarship surrounding this debate since 1985 and identifies the general trends of the arguments. In particular, two primary views developed: a traditionalist view and a revisionist view. This development revealed a disagreement over fundamental questions, which continues to plague the debate.

The decline of communism in the 1980s prompted new historical questions concerning the process by which societies gained a sense of identity. In particular, the reconsideration of nationality as something constructed, as opposed to something produced naturally, meant the reevaluation of religion's influence in identity formation.¹ Since the 1980s, scholarly work has viewed religion as the primary means of creating English political and ideological cohesion. Jonathan Clark's *English Society, 1688-1832* (1985) sparked the debate concerning how religion, specifically Protestantism, influenced the expression and development of English national identity in the 18th century. Shortly thereafter, a viewpoint influenced by Benedict Anderson formed. It emphasized Protestantism's centrality to 18th century English national identity by examining print media sources. Yet, starting around the mid-1990s, scholars began to question the grounds on which this view, based on Anderson's theory, based its

claims. By expanding the type of sources examined, these scholars challenged the idea of a monolithic English Protestantism and questioned its dominating influence on 18th century English society. Therefore, resulting from these new questions and alternative sources two views formed – termed in this paper the traditional view, influenced by Anderson, and the revisionism, challenging the relationship between Protestantism and national identity – by which, as the revisionism asserted itself, there was a growing recognition of the plural, contested nature of religious and political identities in Britain.

What caused this development? This paper seeks to trace the scholarship written since 1985 surrounding Protestantism's role in the expression and formation of English national identity during the 18th century, identify the debate's primary questions, and suggest what essential elements are missing from the debate. This exploration into the debate's evolution, thus, reveals the absence of consensus on

¹ Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983) contributed the most popular, prevailing work on this theory.

fundamental questions, reflecting the dissonant views of national identity in Britain.²

Investigations into 18th century English Protestant nationality from 1985 to the early 1990s identified simple connections between the institutional church and English nationalistic feelings. Influenced by Benedict Anderson's nationalism theory, the scholars of this traditional view chiefly examined the 18th century England's explosion of mass printing media, mass political movements, and increases in literacy rates. They concluded that these elements were necessary to create and sustain national feelings. Protestantism, then, acted in the early 18th century as the framework, the necessary communal precursor, that allowed national sentiments to develop in the late 18th century.³ Jonathan Clark's *English Society, 1688-1832* pioneered the centralization of the Anglican church as the key component contributing toward English nationalistic development. He shifted focus away from social and economic conditions and toward Anglicanism as the driving force behind Englishness by analyzing Anglican political theology, the *ancien régime* founded on Trinitarian Anglicanism, among other factors.⁴ As Colin Haydon wrote, Clark successfully sought to "reintegrate religion into...[our] historical vision of the Georgian era."⁵ As such, Clark energized the debate concerning how, and to what extent, Protestantism influenced 18th century English national identity.

Given the impression that the press mediated national identity, scholars in the 1980s and early 90s tended to limit nationalistic feelings to modern times. In particular, scholars argued that vague notions of national feelings only became significant in the

late 18th century – displaying Anderson's influence. For instance, Gerald Newman argued that feelings of English national identity only became politically significant at the time of, and in response to, the French Revolution.⁶ As the argument goes, without modern communication and political capabilities, national feelings could not significantly take hold among 18th century Englishmen.

While Clark and Newman contributed a couple of essential elements to the traditional view, Linda Colley most prominently advanced it by adding significant nuance to the scholarly understanding of the unfolding of English nationality, thus provoking sub-debates surrounding her main assertions within the traditional view. Firstly, while agreeing with Clark's central positioning of Protestantism in English nationalistic development, she argued that national feelings were expressed and formed in an adversarial manner. Essential to this viewpoint was Colley's interpretation of the prevalence of anti-Catholic attitudes among English Protestants. She wrote that "[protestant] internal rivalries were abundant and serious. But they should not obscure what remained the towering feature in the religious landscape, the gulf between Protestant and Catholic."⁷ She asserted that Catholicism provided "the Other" which, through a series of contacts and conflicts, in particular with Catholic France, enabled identity formation.⁸ Colley popularized this adversarial perspective as one of Protestantism's primary influences on Englishness.

In addition to fixating on "the Other," Colley developed the notion of England as a self-defined sacred nation. Entrenched in reformed theology, 18th

²English historiography and other academic disciplines mirror these broader trends. See, Tony Claydon and Ian McBride's "The trials of the chosen peoples: recent interpretations of Protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland," in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c.1850*. Ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). And, Paul Lawrence's *Nationalism: History and Theory*, (New York: Pearson Education, 2005).

³Benedict Anderson's theory proved essential to this mode of thinking. Anderson claimed that nationalism is a religious-like construct. As Europe secularized over the course of the 18th century, nationalism emerged in the 18th century as a replacement to religion as the source of communal identification. See, Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36, 46.

⁴Jonathan Clark, *English society 1688-1832: Ideology, social structure, and political practice during the ancien regime*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), introduction.

⁵Colin Haydon, "I love my King and my Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate": anti-catholicism, xenophobia and national identity in eighteenth-century England, in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c. 1850*, ed. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33.

⁶Gerald G. Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), ch 8.

⁷Linda Colley, "Britishness and Otherness: An Argument," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (October, 1992): 317.

⁸Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 5.

century England believed itself to be an elect nation, Colley argued. God watched over England with particular care and concern. Colley argued that “[the English] believed...that their land was nothing less than another and a better Israel.”⁹ The English self-perception as an ‘elect nation’ had three main features that contributed to English identity formation. First, it gave the English a sense of uniqueness; in other words, a feeling of divine favor. Second, it produced a framework to create and interpret a national history. From the ‘elect’ vantage point, parallels could be drawn between the Old Testament’s Israel and early modern England. Trials, wars, and disease took on new meanings as God’s tests of his chosen people. Thirdly, it enhanced a sense of destiny.¹⁰ Thus, this providential sense enhanced the English ability to imagine their community: a self-perceived particularity, a common history that gives meaning to the present, and a future unity.

With Colley sophisticating the traditional view, she stimulated two major sub-debates within the traditional view. These had to do with anti-Catholic feelings and sacred history. Stemming from these sub-debates, scholars asked more pointed questions that required more detailed answers. If anti-Catholic sentiments contributed a vital aspect enabling the English imaginary community, then how common were these perceptions among 18th century Englishmen? In what ways was this expressed? How did this affect English national identity formation? Colin Haydon argued that “the main contribution of anti-Catholicism to national identity in the Georgian era was to construct the European continent as fundamentally alien.”¹¹ As such, Haydon continued, the debauchery of the European continent was closely

linked to the influence of the foreign, Roman pope. These attitudes to the foreign Catholics affected English attitudes towards domestic Catholics. Catholics seemed politically flexible, disloyal to the King and nation, especially in times of war.¹² As a result, the English grew to associate Englishness with Protestantism, thus consolidating and strengthening English national sentiments against “the Other.”¹³ Haydon’s argument nuanced Colley’s assertion by displaying, in further detail and sophistication, the ways in which, and to what extent, English Protestant perceptions against Catholics, home and abroad, influenced national feelings.

Similar to their participation in anti-Catholicism’s debate, scholars engaged in sub-debates surrounding the political significance of Colley’s sacred history argument. For instance, how was spiritual uniqueness politically or nationally significant? Robert Ingram points out that the Church of England inculcated a sense of British sacred history – that is, history written with both secular and providential significance. He argues that this sense of divine mission consecrated the British imperial project. Ingram wrote, “in large part, sacred history’s survival and use can be put down to its capacity to comprehend simultaneously within it traditional Christian themes...and more recent Enlightenment sensibilities and concerns.”¹⁴ Sacred history, then, directly linked the Church’s mission with the secular, political British colonial objectives. As such, sacred history closely associated with political interpretations of community and mission. Ingram’s argument, along with Haydon’s, represent the added depth the sub-debates produced, thus refining the traditional view with subtle questions, requiring deep

⁹ Colley, *Britons Forging*, 30.

¹⁰ Tony Claydon and Ian McBride provide helpful analysis of this viewpoint’s impact on English nationalistic thinking. See, Tony Claydon and Ian McBride’s “The trials of the chosen peoples: recent interpretations of Protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland,” in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c.1850*. Ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

¹¹ Colin Haydon, “‘I love my King and My Country, but a Roman Catholic I hate’: anti-catholicism, xenophobia and national identity in eighteenth-century England,” in *Protestantism and National Identity, c. 1650-c.1850*, ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33-4.

¹² An example of this perspective, albeit not within the scope of this study, is T.B. Macauley’s review of a translation of Leopold von Ranke’s *History of the Popes*. See, <http://catholicity.elcore.net/MacauleyOnRanke’sHistoryOfPopes.html>

¹³ Haydon, *anti-catholicism*, 45-6.

¹⁴ Robert G. Ingram, “From Barbarism to Civility, from Darkness to Light: Preaching Empire as Sacred History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, 5, (Published online, October 4, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199583591.013.0029>.

knowledge.

In sum, the traditional view considered feelings of national identity as a modern phenomenon, requiring mass media and a literate population to cultivate politically significant identities. Protestantism played a central role in English identity formation by providing the framework necessary for political ideological cohesion. In particular, it contributed “the Other” necessary for nationalism’s progress in an adversarial manner, and Protestantism’s use as a means of a self-defined sacred nation provided the uniqueness contributing to England’s imagined community.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, scholars questioned some of the basic notions and assumptions within the traditional view. Emerging from this movement, the revisionism challenged the notion of any simple connections between Protestantism and national identity by examining sources beyond merely print media. Indeed, national identity was mediated in multiple ways – e.g., sermons, official ceremonies, liturgies. This alternative perspective undermined the influence of Anderson’s theory by deconstructing the narratives told by traditionalist historians and re-explaining national identity as a phenomenon capable of formation and expression prior to the late 18th century. As such, the revisionism argued that national feelings were well-established and could be propagated and sustained in such a way that early modern Englishmen could imagine a wide, national community; thus, nationalism stretched further into the past than previously recognized.

The revisionism arose from deconstructing the traditional view’s basic assumptions and notions. First and foremost, it was argued that traditionalists overplayed the role Protestantism had in English national identity formation and expression. For example, Steven Pincus argued that, in recent scholarship, there had been a tendency to over-extend theological explanations of historical phenomenon. Indeed, he argued that the proper relationship between Protestantism and English national identity is “one which understood Protestantism to be a

constituent in, though not constitutive of, English national identity.”¹⁵ As the argument goes, scholars must resist the meta-narrative temptation of inflating Protestantism’s role due to its central position within 18th century English society – thus, undermining Clark’s contribution.

As scholars subverted Protestantism’s centrality, scholars began questioning Protestantism’s anti-Catholic attitudes. They argued that anti-Catholic attitudes had not spread across the English population to the extent previously claim and, in fact, they suggested that anti-Catholic sentiments were not as central to 18th century English Protestant ideology as previously suggested. Jeremy Black argued that, as a result of the primacy given to metropolitan print media as the source of examination, the anti-Catholic argument assumed the hegemony and uniformity of English Protestant attitudes toward Catholics. By considering rural voices and practices conducted (as opposed to print media) in relation to the European continent context it becomes evident that there was no universal response to anti-Catholic sentiments. Indeed, the robust English civil society cultivated an environment of political and religious ideological plurality.¹⁶ Thus, the connection between Protestantism and English national identity is not so simple. Identity formation is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood in a vacuum; it must incorporate real experiences and practices, not just print media.

Near its extreme end, the revisionism questioned whether Protestantism had any influence on English national identity formation. Brian Young exemplified this perspective. He highlighted the divisions within the church establishment over issues of doctrine and ecclesiology and how the church sought Protestant allies on the European continent for support and legitimacy. As such, he argued that “taken together, this internal division within the establishment, and its tendency to set itself within an international context, suggest that the church of England could provide only a problematic foundation for any sense of English nationality.”¹⁷ It is clear, then, that the relationship

¹⁵ Steven Pincus, “‘To protect English liberties,’” in *Protestantism and National Identity, c. 1650-c.1850*, ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93.

¹⁶ Jeremy Black, “Confessional State or elect nation? Religion and identity in eighteenth-century England,” in *Protestantism and National Identity, c. 1650-c.1850*, ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53-74.

between Protestantism and English national identity was ambiguous. If Protestantism had a role, and previous scholars overplayed that role, then is there a corrective approach toward understanding the relationship?

Scholars within the revisionism began to argue that the relationship between Protestantism and English national identity was misunderstood by the traditional view and that there was a corrective understanding. In particular, Tony Claydon and Ian McBride argued that, even though the internal ambiguities of the Protestant faith, among other things, disrupted confidence in English identity, the connection between Protestantism and Englishness ought not to be abandoned, but rather redefined. Instead of scholars arguing the relationship descriptively, Claydon and McBride claimed that scholars must write the relationship in an *aspirational* manner.¹⁸ Meaning that 18th century Englishmen thought they ought to be an ideal Protestant nation, yet they recognized this was not their reality. As a result, this new approach recognized the interdependency between Protestantism and English national identity, meanwhile giving proper weight to their discrepancies.¹⁹ Claydon and McBride represent a shift in the revisionism to constructing an alternative explanation concerning the function of Protestantism in English nationalism. In this shift, the revisionism continued to utilize the alternative sources to offer an alternative explanation that re-centralized Protestantism in a corrective manner.

Instead of looking to the urban media for elements of national identity, which assumes nationalism as purely a modern phenomenon, the revisionism argued for alternative means to

propagating national feelings, rooted in early 18th century identity formation. W.M. Jacob argued that, in the 18th century, by belonging to and taking part in communal activities, identities were formed corporately.²⁰ Due to Protestantism's role as a chief communal commitment among 18th century Englishmen, it was argued that religious communities could serve as the basis of identity formation – and, therefore, this communal commitment constructed the foundation necessary for political identities.²¹ This prompted a reconsideration of early modern feelings of national identity. While the traditional view failed to recognize early-modern political feelings as legitimate, the revisionism argued that political feelings could be mediated beyond merely the print media, in particular through sermons and official ceremonies. Thus, nationalistic feelings, they argued, could legitimately be formed and cultivated prior to capitalism's explosion through Protestantism's function as a centripetal communal force that guided political and ideological identity in the early-18th century.

Examining sermons became crucial in the legitimization of early modern national feelings and the development of new impressions concerning Protestantism's influence. Scholars argued that sermons were central to 18th century British life and were often published, thus serving as a useful tool to understanding the concerns of the British.²² In particular, Pasi Ihalainen argued that, pre-industrial development, the church acted as the primary means of communication and propagating national identity.²³ This centrality meant that sermons – which, were often preached at official ceremonies and, subsequently, published – provide a useful source for

¹⁷ Brian Young, "A history of variations," in *Protestantism and National Identity, c. 1650-c.1850*, ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 107.

¹⁸ Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, "The trials of the chosen peoples: recent interpretations of Protestantism and national identity in Britain and Ireland," in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650-c.1850*. Ed. Claydon, Tony and McBride, Ian. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ W. M Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.

²¹ Anthony D. Smith has, notably, advanced this mode of thinking. A common theme within his works is the conceptual innovation required to transition from early modern religious national sentiments to modern secular nationalism, based on collective identities and loyalties. See, Anthony D. Smith's *Nationalism and Modernism: a critical survey of recent theories of nations and nationalism*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

²² Keith Francis, "Sermons: Themes and Developments," in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, 3, (Published online, October 4, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199583591.013.0029>.

tracing the evolution of English national identity.²⁴ With the introduction of alternative sources, the revisionism could construct an alternative narrative re-explaining the Protestantism's role in English national identity; and, as the argument goes, they could paint a more accurate, realistic picture of Protestantism's centrality, influence on the English population, and attitudes towards Catholics and the European continent. This meant that Protestantism's role went beyond merely providing a passive framework for political cohesion, like the traditional view argued. Instead, it was argued, Protestantism actively contributed to political identity formation, which enabled and legitimized nationalistic senses prior to the late 18th century.

While the evolution from the traditional view to the revisionism captures the general formulation of the debate's two primary positions, recent evidence suggests that there is a budding third direction in response to the revisionism. Scholarship in the 21st century attempted to pave a middle road between the two schools of thought by utilizing the revisionism's sources to reconsider the traditionalists' arguments. This suggests that the third movement in the historiography is a nuance of arguments from the first movement. Not a rejection of previously held views, but rather a capturing of subtleties within previous arguments.

To prove the point, one example of such nuance is the debate regarding the degree of secularization Protestantism experienced in 18th century England in relation to English political identity. From the traditional view, Gerald Newman argued that, by 1789, all the elements required for constructing English national identity were in place; yet, in response to the French Revolution and the subsequent conservative suppression of political reform, English national identity developed under the guise of a conservative religious movement – the Evangelical movement. Thus, Protestantism acted as the means to achieve a secular, political goal.²⁵

Alternatively, scholarship in the 21st century sought to deepen historical understandings of Protestantism's secularization in England during the 18th century by utilizing the revisionists' method of inquiry. Psai Ihalainen, examining sermons throughout the 18th century, argued that while feelings of nationality were expressed with religious rhetoric – especially expressed through official sermons – that rhetoric secularized. The concept of the nation, then, moved away from a confessional state – or an Israel-like nation – and towards a secular, political understanding of the nation that transcended Christian denominations.²⁶ Thus, Ihalainen's argument agrees with the conclusion drawn by Newman, even though exploring alternative sources.

Furthermore, the rise of the middle-ground approach between the traditionalists and the revisionism prompted new questions to old arguments. For example, to what degree did English Protestantism secularize over the course of the 18th century? While analyzing sermons in 18th century England, Grayson Ditchfield disagreed largely with both Newman and Ihalainen. He claimed that the birth and advance of secularization in the 18th century argument had been exaggerated. In his view, a close academic study of sermon literature promotes the conclusion that religious values still dominated public life, as shown in the widespread interest in evangelism, anti-slavery, and eschatology.²⁷ This fine distinction of the traditionalists' conclusions by examining the revisionists' alternative sources marks an important shift in the historiography.

The rise of the 21st century approach suggests a reexamination of the traditionalists' arguments and the revisionists' methods. New questions are asked of the old arguments and new tasks are requested from old sources. As a result, the new movement has brought about discoveries of nuance as opposed to the revisionism's rejections.

While recent evidence shows promising signs

²³ Pasi Ihalainen, *Protestant Nations Redefined: Changing Perceptions of National Identity in the Rhetoric of the English, Dutch, and Swedish Public Churches, 1685-1772* (Leiden; Brill, 2005), 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁵ Newman, *English Nationalism Cultural*, ch. 8.

²⁶ Ihalainen, *Protestant Nations Redefined*, 14-6.

²⁷ Grayson Ditchfield, "Sermons in the Age of the American and French Revolutions," in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon 1689-1901*, 10, (Published online, October 4, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199583591.013.0029>.

towards resolving the question of Protestantism's role in the formation and expression of 18th century English national identity, more must be done to answer the question. In particular, scholars must reach a consensus on fundamental questions. How does one define national identity? What or who constitutes nationalistic feelings? Are nationalistic feelings confined to modern times? These fundamental questions must be definitively answered in order to reach consensus among historians. Universally accepted answers to these questions may seem unfeasible; yet, without this firm base, the debate will continue to sway back-and-forth, repeatedly circling these questions, unable to reach durable resolutions.

One potential positive step toward that firm base is the expansion of available sources to historical inquiry to include hymns written in England over the course of the 18th century. Though there is the potential that hymns may speak to different time periods or unrelated themes, the hymns composed during the 18th century invite historians to examine how Protestants expressed worship and praise. If, as the argument goes, Protestantism is central to national identity formation, providing the framework for political cohesion, then hymns provided a space to express such sentiments. Thus, several potential questions concerning the nature of 18th century English Protestantism could be answered: were there hymnal themes of Britain's self-perception as a sacred nation? Was there a plurality of 18th century hymnal forms or thematic patterns that correlates to the contested nature of religious ideology in England? Were anti-Catholic attitudes expressed in hymns? Was there a sense of Englishness conveyed in hymns prior to the late 18th century? Or, if Englishness was expressed in hymns, did that correlate to the expansion of the print media and an increasingly literate population? As a result, hymns offer one more method of English national identity expression that historians could study and, potentially, lead historians one step closer towards determining Protestantism's role in 18th century English national identity formation and expression.

The debate over Protestantism's influence on 18th century English national identity, then, reveals the need for a firm understanding of fundamental

questions. The debated evolved from the traditional view's simple connections between Protestantism and English nationalism influenced by Anderson's theory to the revisionism's alternative sources, deconstruction and assertion of a complex, splintered reality. Basic questions were left unanswered, voices over-emphasized, and others left unheard. The traditional view's overreach caused a search for alternative sources. This led to a subversion of conventional notions and narratives, which fragmented understandings of 18th century English nationality. In response, recent evidence suggests a new path forming between the two opposing views, resulting in a positive step toward resolution. But more work has been left undone. In order to gain ground toward a definitive answer, the next step is to incorporate 18th century hymns into the sources drawn upon by historians. This source presents a largely uncharted territory that could provide essential insight into the relationship between Protestantism and 18th century English national identity.

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