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The Fifth Monarchists: Forgotten Radicals of the English Revolution

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Abstract

The Fifth Monarchists were a radical group of Puritans during the period of the English Civil War who sought to seize power in England in order to prepare for what they believed was Christ's inevitable return in the near future to reign in England. Previous research concerning them is scarce, and what scholarship there is does little to explain the importance of the events surrounding them. This study seeks to explain the historical significance of this group through exploring the goals of the group and the means by which they set out to accomplish them. An assortment of primary sources from the period were used, including pamphlets, letters, diaries, and speeches. The study demonstrates that there was a significant relationship between this group and the governing officials for a time that gave them unique opportunities to begin pursuing their goals, only for them to ultimately fail. Thus, this study demonstrates that the Fifth Monarchists' failure to achieve their goals was significant through showing that they had reasonable chances of making a lasting impact as well as through showing what changes that could have entailed.

Keywords

Fifth Monarchists, English Civil War

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Joshua Nevin

History and Government

Abstract

The Fifth Monarchists were a radical group of Puritans during the period of the English Civil War. Previous research concerning them is scarce, and what scholarship there is does little to explain the importance of the events surrounding them. This study seeks to explain the historical significance of this group through exploring the goals of the group and the means by which they set out to accomplish them. An assortment of primary sources from the period were used, including pamphlets, letters, diaries, and speeches. The study demonstrates that there was a significant relationship between this group and the governing officials for a time that gave them unique opportunities to begin pursuing their goals, only for them to ultimately fail. Thus, this study demonstrates that the Fifth Monarchists' failure to achieve their goals was significant through showing that they had reasonable chances of making a lasting impact as well as through showing what changes that could have entailed.

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Introduction

History is written by the victors. At least, so goes the adage. Perhaps, however, it would be more accurate to state that history remembers the victors. The losers, on the other hand, often fade into obscurity. Such is the case with many of the radical groups of the English Revolution, and in particular, with one group known as the Fifth Monarchists.

The English Civil War (or, as some historians refer to it, the English Civil Wars), was a brutal conflict that toppled the established order in England. King Charles I was eventually executed, and a power vacuum was left in England that allowed for a power struggle among different groups, each with its own vision of the future of the British Isles.

Review of Literature

The English Civil War and subsequent Commonwealth government under Cromwell are well documented with many primary and secondary sources. However, there has been considerable division among historians, with different schools of thought taking different stances on the significance of the Revolution, and some consider whether it constitutes a revolution at all. There is broad disagreement over the factors that led to the war, as well as the implications that it had on English history.

Schools of Thought

There are numerous schools of thought surrounding the English Civil War, as can be expected of any major conflict that played such a pivotal role in a nation's history. In this case, there are four major schools of thought that have been dominant in modern historiography of the English Civil War, though they sometimes overlap and are not all-encompassing. These are the Whigs, the Marxists, the Revisionists, and the Post-Revisionists.

The older schools are the Whigs and the Marxists. Both hold to the idea of an English "Revolution" that led to grand changes in English society and government.¹ Additionally, this deterministic approach to history resulted in both seeing the Civil War as a culmination of decades, if not centuries, of cultural and political shifts all leading to unavoidable conflict.² Despite these similarities, there are differences between the two schools of thought that distinguish them from each other quite significantly.

To some extent, the Whiggish school of thought interprets the conflict as a struggle between monarchism and democracy, focusing on the liberal and democratic changes brought about by the war that led ultimately to the Glorious Revolution. Samuel Rawson Gardiner was one of the most significant Whiggish historians of the Civil War.

¹ Zaller, "What Does the English Revolution Mean? Recent Historiographical Interpretations of Mid-Seventeenth Century England." pg. 619

² Harris, Tim. "Revisiting the Causes of the English Civil War." pg. 617

Seeing it as a revolution against the monarchy for a more democratic, populist government, Gardiner interpreted the war as a development that was leading to the liberal values that were becoming mainstream in England in his day (the late 1800s).³ Thus, he took an approach strongly tied to his ideology and interpreted the history as the gradual (and seemingly inevitable) development of democracy and liberalism in England.

The second is the Marxist school, dominant in the 1900s after the Whigs. The Marxists differ fundamentally from the Whigs in that they view the English Civil War as a revolution brought about by the rise of the bourgeoisie in seventeenth-century England. Perhaps the most well-known and important Marxist historian of the English Civil War is Christopher Hill, renowned for his scholarship on the subject from works such as *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* and *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*. He argues that capitalism and the middle class played a significant role in bringing about the revolution, pointing to correlations between Calvinism (most of the Puritans were Calvinist) and capitalism and concluding that Puritanism and modern scientific theory arose together as a result of the rise of the middle class out of feudal England.⁴ He also argues that it was Puritan influences that

contributed to the ideas of the industrial revolution, especially in regards to opinions on the poor working class.⁵ Thus, he tends to see the English Revolution as a stepping stone in the rise of the middle class and the bourgeoisie in later centuries.

In contrast to these views, which both look at the English Civil War as part of a bigger picture, the Revisionist movement of the 1970s and onward offered a different interpretation. Rather than viewing the Civil War as part of England's long journey towards either democracy or capitalism and then socialism, the Revisionists prefer to look at the actions of individuals and Parliament that contributed directly to the rise of war. Post-Revisionists take a similar stance, though they are more "middle-of-the-road" in their approach, looking at somewhat deeper roots of the conflict compared to traditional Revisionists. Tim Harris is one such scholar, explaining that Revisionism stood for interpreting the history of the time without "reading history backward" and imposing our own modern understanding on it.⁶ However, he takes a more Post-Revisionist approach, arguing that there were deeper, fundamental causes of the war, while still maintaining the autonomy and influence of individuals.⁷

³ Adamson, "Eminent Victorians: S. R. Gardiner and the Liberal As Hero," pg. 647

⁴ Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution*, pg. 261

⁵ Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, pg. 507

⁶ Harris, Tim. "Revisiting the Causes of the English Civil War," pg. 617

⁷ Harris, Tim. "Revisiting the Causes of the English Civil War," pgs. 619-620

Causes and Results of War

There is quite a bit of literature concerning the causes for the English Civil War. However, while there is some general consensus on the direct causes and events leading up to the war, the schools of thought differ on broader and more deep-rooted causes. The two essential causes that are agreed upon are religious conflict due to the Reformation and the Puritan movements within England and the political tensions between the monarchy and Parliament. However, there is debate on the relationship between these two causes, as well as the more profound societal and cultural ideas that may have played a part to varying degrees.

Some argued for the long-term causes that led to the war. Tim Harris, in his book *Rebellion: Britain's First Stuart Kings*, he argues that it was causes going all the way back to James I's reign that led to Charles I's disastrous rule and the rebellion against him.⁸ Problems with finances, religion, and other issues led to rising tension, Charles's poor decisions (compared to the better ones made by James), and ultimately, the rebellion that would lead to his untimely death.⁹

Mark Stoye looked at deeper cultural ideas that influenced the war, such as English nationalism. He argues that the

rampant nationalism of the English people influenced Parliament and England's relationships with Scotland and Ireland.¹⁰ This resulted ultimately in the beginning of the "reconquest" of the British Isles by the English at the end of the Civil War under Cromwell.¹¹

Francis Fukuyama also wrote on the nationalism of the time, pointing to it as the reason this was the last major civil war in England. Tied to its reformation against the Roman Church, the new English national identity was solidified in that period, along with their concept of English rights. It was Charles I's decision to ignore this reality that caused the Civil War.¹²

Other scholars examine the immediate causes and results of the Civil War. There is general consensus on the immediate causes, those being the religious tensions between Charles I and Puritans and the political rivalry between Parliament and the king. Brian Manning writes of the war, pointing to the distrust between Puritans and the more "popish" churches with organized structures.¹³ Among the more important immediate causes of the war was the influence of the radicals, especially in Parliament.

David Como writes of the radicals, attributing much of not only the causes of

⁸ Harris, Tim. *Rebellion: Britain's First Stuart Kings*, pg. 7

⁹ Harris, Tim. *Rebellion: Britain's First Stuart Kings*, pg. 502

¹⁰ Stoye, Mark. "English 'Nationalism', Celtic Particularism, and the English Civil War," pg. 1113

¹¹ Stoye, pg. 1128

¹² Fukuyama, Francis. "The Last English Civil War," pg. 22-23

¹³ Manning, "The Outbreak of the English Civil War," pg. 1

the war, but also the post-war decisions made on radicals. Radical Parliamentarians were the ones who decided that they no longer needed a king,¹⁴ and this led eventually to the execution of Charles in 1649. The radicals were influential in Parliament, especially later on in the Civil War.

Gary S. De Krey wrote concerning one major group of radicals known as the Levellers. This group supported broad expansion of government reform and natural rights, such as expanding the franchise among Englishmen, and De Krey argues that their platforms are quite similar to later influential philosophers, such as John Locke.¹⁵ The Levellers are also explored in James Kloppenberg's *Toward Democracy*, in which he points to their role in attempting to establish a populist system of government whereby Parliament would be representative of the will of the people.¹⁶ John Walter writes of the Levellers in his book *Covenanting Citizens*, where he writes of their use of the Protestation Oath to support their cause during and after the war.¹⁷ Trevor Royle even points to similarities between the Levellers and the American revolutionaries, with their demands for representation, indicating that the ideas

of the Levellers at the very least had lived past their end.¹⁸

In spite of their failure to ultimately achieve their objectives, their ideas would one day take hold not only in England but also in much of the rest of the world. Thus, while they immediately failed, it can be said that their ideas eventually succeeded. Because of this (and also likely the fact that they share many of the values of modern Western scholars), they are extremely well-documented and written on by modern historians.

Summary of the Literature

The English Civil War is a well-researched topic in general, with plenty of scholarship already covering broad aspects of it. However, as one narrows down and focuses on the radicals, there is clearly less research available, especially when one excludes the Levellers. Many of the smaller, less influential radical groups have little modern research. One such group with very little modern scholarship is the Fifth Monarchists.

Questions and Methodology

In studying the Fifth Monarchists, it would be easy to assume that they were unimportant, having had little direct

¹⁴ Como, Radical Parliamentarians and the English Civil War, pg. 428

¹⁵ De Krey, Gary S. Following the Levellers. Vol I, "Introduction: The Levellers, Their Followers, and the Historians."

¹⁶ Kloppenberg, James T. *Toward Democracy*, pg. 108

¹⁷ Walter, John. *Covenanting Citizens: the Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution*, pgs. 4, 249

¹⁸ Royle, Trevor. *The British Civil War: The Wars of the Three Kingdoms, 1638-1660*, pg. 821

impact on the direction of English culture and government compared to other groups such as the Levellers. However, a thorough study of history often reveals that the decisions of relatively few individuals in key positions of influence can have massive impacts on the course of human history. Thus, a group such as the Fifth Monarchists may have been closer to having a disproportionate influence on the development of English culture and government than many assume. Two questions, therefore, come to mind: first, whether they had any realistic hope of implementing their vision on English society, and second, what effect on English society their movement would have had. In order to answer these questions, primary sources from the period were carefully examined.

History

Doctrine and Teachings

Key to understanding the Fifth Monarchists (or the Fifth Monarchy Men, as they tended to call themselves) was the doctrine of millenarianism. A teaching strongly advocated by many preachers among Independent Puritans, millenarianism focused primarily on the idea that Jesus Christ was soon to return to set up his millennial reign on earth, as foretold in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Key advocates (and Fifth Monarchists) included such influential fellows as John Archer, William Aspinwall, John Rogers, John

Spittlehouse, and Christopher Feake. The doctrine featured a number of teachings that shaped their political and cultural aspirations.

First was the concept of the “fifth monarchy,” the idea that Christ would return to set up a literal, physical kingdom. This idea (and the name itself) was derived from the biblical book of Daniel, in chapters two and seven. In chapter two, the book recounts a dream that King Nebuchadnezzar had about a statue of different materials representing four different kingdoms, which are then smashed by a rock that represents a fifth kingdom. The text then states, “And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom... it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”¹⁹ Later, in chapter seven, the book describes four beasts representing four kingdoms, which all are then overcome by the “Son of man,” to whom there was given “dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him.”²⁰ These passages seemingly describe the rise of a “fifth” kingdom after the previous four, subduing all of the earth under the “Son,” whom most Christians held to be Jesus.

The biblical book of Revelation also seems to support a future literal kingdom of Christ, at least to the advocates of Millenarianism. “Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no

¹⁹ Daniel 2:44, KJV

²⁰ Daniel 7:14, KJV

power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.”²¹ Thus, it seemed to indicate that Christ will return one day and will rule with his resurrected saints.

Those who believed in the “fifth monarchy” stressed the importance of these passages and of their literal interpretation. John Archer (while in the process not missing a chance to take a swipe at the Pope) urged that the texts in these passages had a “literal sense,” as well as a spiritual one, arguing that it was akin to failing “to find the gold and separate it from the dross.”²² Insisting on a literal interpretation, he argued that “all Kingdoms and States, that were from first to last under any of the *Monarchies*, shall be swallowed up and come under this. And this is a fifth *Monarchy* which shall arise in the world after the former four, which is meant of a state of Christ’s Kingdom, as appears.”²³

These texts had other literal implications for the movement and their perception of the world around them. Daniel 7 also discusses different beasts, the last of which has ten horns, three of which are supplanted by a smaller one. This smaller horn had “eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things.”²⁴ The mention of the “ten toes”

in Daniel 2 on the statue also were significant to these theologians, and they interpreted the passages to indicate ten kingdoms that would exist at that time, with the little horn representing an “anti-christ.” Archer assumes this little horn is referring to the papacy, as most good Protestants seemed earnest to presume.

Additionally, some used this to attempt to predict exactly when Christ would return. Based on the book of Revelation, which said the “beast” would be worshiped for forty-two months before his destruction,²⁵ Archer calculated that the “little horn” would therefore be in power for 1260 years (forty-two months times thirty days per month yields 1260, which Archer converted to years). Assuming that the pope began his rule in A.D. 406, this gave him the year 1666, which he also determined was a key number because it contained “666,” a number which held significance in Revelation 13:18.²⁶ Other theologians came up with similar years, with William Aspinwall giving the year 1673 as his estimate for the end of the “anti-christ’s dominion.”²⁷

Finally, the indication that Christ would reign with the saints, as stated in Daniel 7:27, led the Fifth Monarchists to

²¹ Revelation 20:6, KJV

²² Archer, *The Personal Reign of Christ upon Earth*. pg 38

²³ Archer, pg. 8

²⁴ Daniel 7:8, KJV

²⁵ Revelation 13:5, KJV

²⁶ Archer, pg. 44

²⁷ Aspinwall, *A Brief Description of the Fifth Monarchy, or Kingdome, that Shortly is to Come Into the World*. pg. 14

believe that they, as the saints, were destined to rule alongside Christ in the coming kingdom. Not only would the beast be overthrown, but the saints would play a role in doing so, as well as in the preliminary preparations for Christ's return. As Aspinwall strongly believed, the saints played a role in overthrowing the beast, and Christ would soon thereafter return (after the Jews had been won over to the faith).²⁸

The extreme literal interpretation of these texts and the strong belief in the imminence of Christ's return were crucial to the Fifth Monarchists' decision-making. Viewing themselves as the true followers and "saints" of Christ, they saw it as their duty to pave the way for the arrival of King Jesus through the establishment of a new social and political order. Not only did they believe that they were destined to succeed, but they also seemed to view their actions as prophetically necessary before Christ would return to ultimately crush the antichrist and restore his rule to earth.

Thus, it was only natural that they would become avid supporters of the rebel forces against Charles I. In fact, many key leaders (particularly in the army) were followers of the Fifth Monarchy, and they saw the conflict in many ways as a holy war. Using the turmoil and chaos brought about by the revolution, they would attempt to bring about the political and societal reforms

necessary to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth.

New Government Under Cromwell

The tensions between Parliament and King Charles I saw many Puritans turn against the king in favor of Parliament, and the Fifth Monarchists were no exception. With the movement being predominantly among Independent Puritans who opposed rigid church structures such as those of the Anglican and Presbyterian churches,²⁹ it was only natural that they would oppose the king, who was head of the Anglican church. Thus, they sided eagerly with the Parliamentary forces, with many becoming key leaders in the conflict, such as Colonel Okey, Colonel Rainborough, Lieutenant-General Goffe, and Major-General Thomas Harrison.³⁰

With the beginning of the conflict, a shift became apparent in the teachings among the Fifth Monarchists. Their teachings took a more nationalistic tone, with some teachers believing that the British Isles would be the center of the new kingdom Christ was going to establish. In contrast to John Archer's 1642 writings, which held the Pope to be the "little horn" referred to in Daniel 7, William Aspinwall in 1653 charged that it was none other than Charles I himself, and that England, Ireland, and Scotland were the "three horns" (or kingdoms) that he supplanted and

²⁸ Aspinwall, pg. 14

²⁹ Rogers, John, Rogers, Edward, pg. 63

³⁰ Rogers, P. G., *The Fifth Monarchy Men*. pg. 15

ruled.³¹ Thus, it can be seen that the English Civil War was not merely a conflict between the king and Parliament in their eyes, but rather, it was a conflict where the saints were crushing the beast and making way for the return of Jesus as foretold in Daniel and Revelation.

With this perception of the war, it is not surprising that they were some of the strongest advocates for the execution of Charles I. Some of the signatories of his death warrant were strong supporters of the Fifth Monarchists, including Thomas Harrison and John Okey.³² Especially noteworthy was how open the Fifth Monarchists such as Harrison were in their means of killing the king. Rejecting the idea of poisoning or silently overthrowing him, they advocated having a public trial and execution of the king.³³ Thus, they became public regicides, destroying the “beast” for the sake of Christ for all the world to see. With the “little horn” safely dead, they would have the freedom to set up the rule of the saints over England and thereafter the world.

The Fifth Monarchists initially worked quite closely with Cromwell. As Edward Hyde Clarendon wrote, “There were few men with whom Cromwell more communicated, or upon whom he more depended for the conduct of any thing

committed to him.”³⁴ A result of this relationship was the overthrow of the “Rump Parliament.” Harrison and Cromwell, both members of the Parliament, emptied the House with musketeers, bringing down that Parliament.³⁵ Thus, it can be seen that Cromwell had a close relationship with at least some of the Fifth Monarchists and worked closely with men like Harrison.

The founding of the new government after these events, as it turns out, was also heavily influenced by Fifth Monarchists. John Rogers wrote a number of “epistles” to Oliver Cromwell. The most prominent one was sent in 1653 and proposed the establishment of a “Synhedrin” comprised of seventy members.³⁶ The men were to be chosen ultimately by Cromwell, and they were to be chosen on the basis of their moral character and their piety. He also suggested the appointment of twelve “governors” who would help rule as the “Council of State,” as happened in Israel under Moses.

Shortly thereafter, the new system was adopted, at least to a limited degree, in the way in which these Fifth Monarchists such as Rogers wished. A new Parliament was chosen by Cromwell, consisting of 140 members, and a Council of State was established, with

³¹ Aspinwall, pgs. 1, 7

³² Rogers, P. G. pgs. 17 and 24

³³ Clarendon, Volume VI, pgs. 224-226

³⁴ Clarendon, Volume VI, pg. 220

³⁵ Rogers, P. G., pg. 20

³⁶ Rogers, John, and Rogers, Edward, pg. 50

thirteen members (including Cromwell himself).³⁷ Thus, while the exact specifications set forth by Rogers were not completely followed, the system established was favorable for the Fifth Monarchists.

Thus, the movement was well on its way to achieving its goals, at least politically. Gone was the wretched “beast” Charles I, and the Fifth Monarchists could exploit the vacancy. In addition, they were on good terms with General Cromwell, and they also had numerous members in high ranking positions, allowing them to have greater influence than their small numbers would suggest. Their ideas were, at the very least, respected by Cromwell, and they held some sway in the creation of the new government. The prospects looked bright, at least at that time, for the Fifth Monarchists.

Relationship With Cromwell Broken

Despite what initially seemed to be God’s blessing on their efforts, they soon reached a crisis that would see them ousted from power and put at odds with the bulk of the English people, including Cromwell. This would stem from their radical political aims that would alienate the rest of the Parliament and see the beginning of Cromwell’s outright dictatorship.

The Fifth Monarchists found themselves in a predicament. They certainly had

strong convictions as to what this new government in England should look like, as well as how society should be run under the administration of Christ’s saints. However, they were also at odds with moderate Parliamentarians and other groups who had their own agendas. Thus, they came into conflict, and the results would be severe for the Fifth Monarchy Men.

In 1653, John Rogers wrote two controversial works that outlined the political ideas of the Fifth Monarchists. The first, *Beth-shemesh*, aggressively attacked Presbyterianism, which Rogers abhorred due to its rigid church government which he found too similar to Catholicism (Rogers and most Fifth Monarchists were Independents).³⁸ The second, *Sagrir*, attacked the taking of tithes by the church of England as being too “popish” and tools of “anti-christ,”³⁹ as well as the lawyers in English society, whom he associated with the “beast and false prophets.”⁴⁰

The immediate goals of the Fifth Monarchists were clear. They would root out the Presbyterian influences in England, remove the tithe requirements supporting the English church, and take the power away from the lawyers. In the long-term, they had even larger goals that would have revolutionized English society. These ideas were expounded more greatly by other ministers of the movement, such as William Aspinwall.

³⁷ Rogers, John, and Rogers, Edward, pg. 52

³⁸ Rogers, John, and Rogers, Edward, pg. 62

³⁹ Rogers, John, and Rogers, Edward, pgs. 79-80

⁴⁰ Rogers, John, and Rogers, Edward, pg. 82

William Aspinwall had a radical vision for the English government. Arguing against a legislative body, he focused on an ideal government ruled directly by Christ after his return. He insisted that Parliament would not be necessary in the same form as it was at that point; it would have a different role in this kingdom of Christ. He argued that this system or “council” would not have legislative power but would be intended to appoint judges to apply the laws as Christ gave them.⁴¹ Thus, the rulership of the saints, in his view, was more administrative, with Christ being the only one with legislative authority.

The Fifth Monarchists had wide-ranging goals in terms of foreign policy as well. As they clearly advertised earlier, they believed that Christ would return to set up his kingdom over all of the world. Thus, it would fall to the saints to make the world ready, and this involved destroying the “beast” and his dominion. Thus, they turned to Europe. Rogers advocated, “How durst our army to be still, now the work is to do abroad? . . . for it is the Lord hath sent for us thither, and calls for a part of our army at least into France or Holland.”⁴² These calls for the liberation of saints in Europe were ideologically crucial to the Fifth Monarchists, both for the freedoms of the saints themselves as well as for the spreading of the coming kingdom.

Regardless of their future plans, they first had to achieve their immediate goal: removing the remnants of the “beast’s” kingdom that remained in England. Following Rogers’ proposal, the radicals attempted to pass more radical legislation in Parliament, and the conflicts began. These attempts would begin the undoing of the Fifth Monarchy Men.

On the one hand, they attempted to remove the tithes required by the government to support the church. On the other hand, they attempted to allow government officials to observe ministers throughout the country and remove those that were not found to meet the standards set by the government.⁴³ The legislation failed, but it escalated the tension within Parliament.

Soon, the “Barebones Parliament,” as it was called, decided to put an end to these attempts by committing suicide in December 1653. The moderates voted to give up their power and allow Cromwell to devise a new system of government in order to prevent the radicals from passing any further legislation. Cromwell and the leadership responded with the establishment of the Protectorate, giving more control to Cromwell and removing the Parliament of “saints” that the Fifth Monarchists were so keen on using to prepare the way for Christ’s kingdom.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Aspinwall, pg. 10

⁴² Rogers, John and Rogers, Edward, pg. 84

⁴³ Rogers, P. G., pg. 37

⁴⁴ Rogers, P. G., pg. 37-39

The Fifth Monarchists were livid and soon turned against Cromwell. Welsh preacher Vavasor Powell began to preach openly against Cromwell,⁴⁵ and John Rogers wrote him a stern warning, threatening the wrath of God upon Cromwell and England if he dared align himself with “anti-christ.”⁴⁶ Soon, suspicions arose that the Fifth Monarchists were plotting a coup, and many of the leading figures, including Harrison himself, were dismissed and sent home.⁴⁷ Thus, as quickly as they had gained power, they lost it, their influence vanishing with the loss of their ally Cromwell.

Death of the Movement

Cromwell seemed to show a bit of remorse at the turn of events. In a speech given on September 4, 1654, he stated this:

But, I say, there is another error of more refined sort; 'which' many honest people whose hearts are sincere, many of them belonging to God, 'have fallen into:' and that is the mistaken notion of the Fifth Monarchy... Nevertheless, as many of these men have good meanings, which I hope in my soul they have, it will be the wisdom of all knowing and experienced Christians to do as Jude saith..."Of some," says he, "have compassion, making a difference; others save with fear, pulling

them out of the fire."* I fear they will give too often opportunity for this exercise! But I hope the same will be for their good.⁴⁸

Cromwell, therefore, seemed to take a moderate approach, at least initially, in regards to his treatment of the radical movement.

Regardless of whether these statements were sincere or not, however, any reconciliation of the Fifth Monarchists with Cromwell's cause was not likely to happen. The Fifth Monarchists insisted their way was just and necessary, and, being called by God, they could not compromise on their principles. Thus, the movement found itself isolated from mainstream society and with few allies, if any, in Cromwell's government.

Still, there were some attempts on the part of men such as Rogers to call Cromwell away from his “apostasy.” Rogers wrote him a letter shortly after he assumed the position of “Lord Protector,” urging him to avoid “carnal counselors” and to continue to serve the cause of Christ.⁴⁹ However, this attitude was to be short-lived, and a complete break between them took place instead.

The Fifth Monarchists doubled down on their criticism of Cromwell and his government in the following years. In response to Cromwell's speech on September 4, John Spittlehouse wrote a

⁴⁵ Rogers, John and Rogers, Edward, pg. 107

⁴⁶ Rogers, John and Rogers, Edward, pgs. 108-111

⁴⁷ Rogers, P. G., pgs. 42-43

⁴⁸ Cromwell, *Speeches and Letters*, Vol. 2, pgs. 93-95

⁴⁹ Rogers, John and Rogers, Edward, pgs. 108-111

lengthy reply. “[W]hosoever pretended that they are Christians, and yet refuse so to do, do thereby clearly declare themselves notorious hypocrites, as also professed enemies to Jehovah the Lord Christ, and that by his own attestation, Luke 19:27.”⁵⁰ Thus, Cromwell, and whoever else opposed the coming kingdom of Christ (in other words, refusing to implement a government according to the exact specifications of the Fifth Monarchists), were enemies of God.

Another Fifth Monarchist, Christopher Feake, was a prolific writer and preacher who repeatedly denounced Cromwell. In 1654, while Feake was under arrest, he wrote *The Oppressed Close Prisoner in Windsor-Castle, His Defiance to the Father of Lyes, in the Strength of the God of Truth*. He declared that Cromwell’s government was still serving the beast, saying, “And for this Nation, I dare venture to make it good with the utmost peril of my life, that the spirit of the fourth Beast is yet living and acting its part in *England*.”⁵¹ Concerning what he expected all true Christians to do, he advocated, “The Ministers of Christ understanding this, that no expiations will be allowed, &c. and that yet, they cannot meddle with Antichrist, nor indeed come at him, or at the Beast, and his Horns, but they must of necessity

meddle with State-affairs.”⁵² And meddle with state affairs he did.

Feake continued to write and preach against the Commonwealth throughout the decade. Writing in 1659 of Cromwell and his army’s actions after the war, Feake said, “That *General*, Those *great Commanders*... which had publickly owned and submitted unto the *Lord Jesus*, by word and writing, in as choyce and full expressions as any in the *New Testament*, do now, all on a sudden... lift up an Idol into the Throne of Supream Authority in these Nations, which were to be Governed by none other then the *Lord Jesus Christ himself*.”⁵³ Cromwell himself was becoming, in the eyes of the Fifth Monarchy Men, just as much an enemy as Charles I.

The writings of the Fifth Monarchists continued to become more radical. In 1656, *The Banner of Truth* was published, quite plainly and openly asserting that the Commonwealth government under Cromwell was the beast’s kingdom. “[T]his Power and Government now in England, is the Power and Government of that little Horne.”⁵⁴ It seemed that any subtlety was gone, as was any attempt at reconciliation.

The culmination of the anger of the Fifth Monarchy Men came with the revolt of

⁵⁰ Spittlehouse, “An Answer to one part of The Lord Protector’s Speech: or a Vindication of the Fifth Monarchy-Men,” pg. 18

⁵¹ Feake, *The Oppressed Close Prisoner in Windsor-Castle*, pg. 4

⁵² Feake, *The Oppressed Close Prisoner in Windsor-Castle*, pg. 107

⁵³ Feake, *A Beam of Light*, pg. 51

⁵⁴ Early English Books Online. *The Banner of Truth Displayed*, pg. 26

Thomas Venner. After Charles II was restored to the throne of England in 1660, the Fifth Monarchists under his influence launched a last-ditch attempt to overthrow him and usher in the rule of the saints. Their goals are explained in their pamphlet “A Door of Hope,” where they declared Charles Stuart a “son of a murderer” on a throne established by “the Blood of precious Saints.”⁵⁵ Babylon would be destroyed, and the Antichrist would fall as Christ would deliver the saints one last time.

Thus, they launched their assault on London in January of 1661. Samuel Pepys recounted the events in his diary. Although he initially believed there were some five hundred rebels, it later turned out to be closer to several dozen “fanatiques.”⁵⁶ Thomas Venner was promptly hung, drawn, and quartered.

After this event, little was written by the Fifth Monarchists. The movement died out as Charles II took his throne and its members began to die. Any opportunities to bring about the rule of the saints passed. Needless to say, Christ did not return in the following decades, and the Fifth Monarchy never took place.

Conclusion

Importance of the Fifth Monarchists

With this study of the Fifth Monarchists, the question that arises is the significance of this movement. It failed and died out, accomplishing few of their

objectives that they so clearly pursued. While it may be tempting to turn to the Levellers or other groups that perhaps played a larger role in the development of modern English history or foreshadowed modern political developments, there is one thing that a historian must remember. The failures of individuals, just as much as the successes, play a role in history.

Furthermore, one must resist the temptation to take a deterministic approach and assume that they were doomed to fail. Certainly, history is often decided by the centuries-long cumulation of culture, wars, and other trends, but the decisions made by individuals, whether rational or not, cannot be ignored. As the Revisionists point out, history is often the result of the choices of people. If people had made different choices—whether on the part of the Fifth Monarchists, those who opposed them, or those who were neutral—they ultimately could have changed the fate of England.

The Fifth Monarchists were no insignificant group. While there were certainly other radicals throughout England that held just as fanatical ideas, this group had the key ingredients to success that the others usually lacked. These were primarily their influence in the establishment of a new government, the positioning of particular individuals in positions of power, and alliances with significant individuals.

⁵⁵ Internet Archive, “A Door of Hope,” pg. 1

⁵⁶ Pepys, “Diary entries from January, 1661”

It is important to note that their model of government was adopted quite closely to their original design. This gave them a significant advantage in terms of influence within the new system itself, as they exerted a significant amount of influence on the agenda within Parliament during this period. Furthermore, it also displayed the power they projected through their relationship with Cromwell. Whether he had any sympathies with their movement or whether he was simply using them, he was willing to work with them, to the point of adopting their proposed government system (with modifications).

The presence of individuals in key positions of power was also significant. Thomas Harrison was an invaluable asset to the Fifth Monarchists, both because of his close ties to Cromwell as well as his position within Parliament itself. Furthermore, men such as John Rogers were able to influence Cromwell through their letters, at least to a degree, and having such talented writers and preachers with relatively close ties to Cromwell was a significant advantage for the Fifth Monarchy Men.

However, they failed to take advantage of these for a number of reasons. There are two that are critically important. First, they pushed their agenda too hard and too quickly, killing the new Parliament in its infancy and alienating the other members of Parliament and even Cromwell himself. Second, the moment Cromwell changed the government system, they abandoned their political

alliance with him and made him an enemy.

Thus, they squandered any advantages they had at surviving and leaving a lasting mark on England. They failed to let the government that they helped establish solidify its presence, losing any advantage they possessed from having influenced its concept to begin with. They fought against Cromwell, their most important ally, resulting in many of their own leaders falling out of their influential positions, and they ultimately lost any chances they had at clinging to power.

The Results of Failure

The significance of this failure cannot be understated, and examining their objectives can give an idea of what England managed to avoid had they won out in the end. At the center of the Fifth Monarchy movement was the idea that the saints must prepare the way for Christ's return by establishing the foundations of his kingdom for him. The implications this would have had can already be seen in the legislation they attempted to pass, as well as in their writings.

They likely would have sought to abolish the tithes, as well as the Anglican church. Furthermore, the government may have reformed the judicial system to exclude lawyers (whom John Rogers vehemently opposed), leading to a legal system where defendants and petitioners would have to plead their own cases. It is difficult to predict whether their government could have continued without Cromwell and whether they would have been undone by the restoration of

Charles II, and it is likely that would have stayed the same.

They also may have become more deeply involved in continental warfare, as the Fifth Monarchists advocated for aggression and the expansion of the Fifth Kingdom. Whether English wars against France, Holland, Spain, and other nations would succeed is a subject for another time. However, aggressive foreign policy would hurt English relations with their neighbors and risk isolating England from the rest of Europe for decades. England, already weakened and exhausted from civil war, may have found itself stuck in cycles of warfare that would drain it and slow its development as a modern nation.

Perhaps the most significant implication of their success, however, would have been the relationship between church and state. The Fifth Monarchists sought to establish a state that was completely run and controlled by the Church (or the “Saints,” as they called it), where the state itself would have significant influence over the personal moral decisions of its citizens, as well as churches themselves. It is difficult to see what influence this would have long-term in the development of England, but their ideas may have become more mainstream in English culture and politics, enabling future rulers to exercise greater control over the state.

With the numerous possibilities, it is significant that the Fifth Monarchists failed. Had they maintained their alliance with Cromwell, had they taken a slower approach to achieving their goals, or had individuals such as

Cromwell actually sympathized with their doctrine, things could have ended differently. While it is difficult, if not outright impossible, to determine what exactly may have happened, it seems certain that victory on the part of the Fifth Monarchists would have had drastic effects on Parliament and England as a whole.

What would have happened once the time had passed and Christ had still not returned? That much cannot be said, though the Fifth Monarchists may have been able to adapt, as they did in re-determining who the Antichrist was over and over. Cults throughout history have often been able to do this. Perhaps they would have died out anyway, though any damage done during their time in power may have had long-lasting impacts on England.

While we will never know what the future would have held, the Fifth Monarchists present an invaluable opportunity to reevaluate our perception of history and the past. As historians, we must take care to avoid deterministic interpretations of the past that minimize or ignore the impact that smaller groups of individuals can have on the course of human history.

The mistakes the Fifth Monarchists made were not unavoidable, and it was the decisions they and those around them made that led the English people to where they are today.

Success is often not determined by the actions of the victors, but by those of the defeated. While much attention in the field of history is given to men whose ideas eventually succeeded, such as the

Levellers, perhaps it is time we remembered the Fifth Monarchy Men, whose failure gave us our world today. Their failure does not make them historically insignificant. Rather, they are significant because of it.

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