

THINKERS OF THE XVITH & XVIITH CENTURIES

Reformation had been carried through by a handful of politicians amid the comparative indifference of the population at large. The bulk of the English people, in fact, were believers in the State rather than in any Church; they were concerned with the maintenance of social order more than with the enforcement of religious orthodoxy; they dreaded the return of anarchy more acutely than any lapse into heresy; they were prepared in the interests of tranquillity to accept any reasonable settlement which the Government in its wisdom might institute. They looked upon religion not as a private matter for the consideration and determination of the individual mind, conscience, and will, but as a public affair to be settled for them by the appropriate authority. They took, that is to say, the view of religion which had prevailed in the Athens of Pericles, in the Rome of Julius Cæsar, and in the Constantinople of Justinian. It was essentially a pagan view of religion, but it was the one which (with many other pagan elements) had been imported into Christian society by Constantine the Great, his associates, and their successors. It was the Byzantine view of religion—misnamed the Erastian—which Henry VIII embodied in his Act of Supremacy. It was the view which was defended by Richard Hooker, and the view which is still maintained by those who contend that every Englishman is *ipso facto* a member of the Church of England. It is a view which obliterates the distinction between sheep and goats; a view which ultimately and inevitably involves the identification of God and Mammon.

Unless we realise that this political conception of religion was the one which dominated Tudor England we shall misjudge such persons as the Vicar of Bray, or William Cecil, or even Elizabeth herself. Cecil, for example, conformed to most possible forms of worship—Anglican, Zwinglian, Lutheran, Calvinistic, Catholic—during the course of his respectable career; but he did so without any suspicion that he was laying himself open to an accusation of inconsistency. At all times and in all circumstances he obeyed the law. What more could be asked of a good man? When he himself had a hand in the making of the law, that is to say in 1559, he showed clearly that he conceived a moderate and tolerant Protestantism to be the form of religion demanded in England