The English Civil War: The Political and Religious Implications

The Superiority of the Gravity of the Political Factors over those of the Religious

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With England’s convoluted history, ranging from its rule under deranged leaders as Queen Mary to the less reformative as Queen Elizabeth, the nation was divided into various sectors of land, all differing in regards to their preferred sect of religion. Despite the vastness in the ideologies that defined the English Kingdom, all were united, rather subjected, under the rule of the monarch, and during the 17th century, were under King Charles I, the successor to King James. Unlike the rule of other potentates that came beforehand, King Charles broke the common traditional proceedings in the relationship between Parliament and the monarchy, resulting in multiple conflicts. Charles, in an endeavor to centralize the government’s power within his own hands, progressed to later absolving the Parliament, the very jurisdical entity that ultimately determined a ruler’s ability to establish policies (Wiki). Although the religious differences planted the roots of the division between the gentry and the royalty, it was only through Charles’ unprecedented manipulation of his power and the exploitation of Parliament that England divided into starkly different bodies: the royalty and the gentry. Through Charles’ refusal to comply with orthodox Parliament any legislation and his voluntary decisions in enacting new policies, including those directed to combat rebellions within the kingdom, he set the course for the political factors that led to the advent of the English Civil War.

Before proceeding to discuss the problems associated with Charles and the Parliament, it is imperative to describe the presumed role this representative body was to hold. The main function of Parliament was to serve as a temporary advisor and was only occasionally summoned by the king himself. Furthermore, the standing of the Parliament would be within the disposal of the king, the potentate who is freely able to dissolve the body at any given time. Superficially, Parliament seemed to be an almost obsolete body, but when analyzing the very infrastructures in the relationship between the monarch and this representative body, Parliament’s formidability
laid in its ability to raise tax revenues far in excess of any other revenue to be obtained by the king, duke, prince, or the nobility (Brit). This very power derived from the fact that in order for any successful or effective tax initiatives to be carried out, these initiatives relied on the collaboration of the gentry to provide such payments. And hence, the Parliament was comprised of two separate entities: the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The former was then comprised of elected representatives of the gentry. When these two branches were present, they would holistically represent Parliament with the House of Commons serving to consider the king’s proposals, including any taxes, on behalf of the commoners, and to provide their own propositions (Wiki). Although the Commons could not coerce the monarch into adopting its proposals, its power was subtle: threatening to withhold or to refuse to offer the financial means of carrying any of the monarch’s plans.

The primary issue that arose within Charles handlings of the Parliament was due to the king’s voluntary decisions to ignore the orthodox processes of Parliament, in an endeavor to maintain the position of George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. Upon sending a relief force to defend the French Huguenots, Charles I anointed Villiers as the chief executive ruler of this defense army. However, Charles’ enterprise in trying to defend the Huguenots drastically failed, a project that became a heavy liability for England’s treasury. Charles proceeded to dissolve Parliament to preclude Villiers’ impeachment and did not falter to resort to an illegal forced loan without any formal session with Parliament. However, Parliament was inevitably recalled due to a shortage of funds and in 1629, a “second session” was called. In this particular occurrence, two resolutions were passed by Parliament: anyone who were to bring innovations in the religion of England would be considered an enemy, anyone who levied customs without consent of Parliament would be considered an enemy (Brit). Both were directed towards Charles in
response to this monarch’s decision to dissolve Parliament and also as an endeavor to maintain this body’s political power. Such resolutions encouraged Charles to further distrust the motives of the Parliament, believing that this jurisdicitional entity desired to greatly inhibit the king’s rule.

The issues surrounding Parliament were coupled with the Scottish and Irish rebellions. Although stemming from more religious than political implications, these rebellions eventually echoed, causing further disruptions within Charles’ relationship with Parliament. Charles desired for an uniform Church of England throughout his kingdom. Scotland, however, carried a long-lasting religious body known as the Church of Scotland and was indeed more than simply reluctant in absolving its traditional church. Charles forced the Scottish to adopt a High Anglican Versions of the Book of Common Prayers, resulting in a riot from Edinburgh, which started a micro-civil war known as the Bishop’s War. Furthermore, similar proceedings followed in Ireland during the 1640s when Catholic Irish gentry members demanded concessions for the Catholics living under English rule. Such problems emerged into another micro-civil war known as the Irish Confederate Wars (Wiki).

The rebellions exacerbated Charles relationship with the Parliament as a dearth in monetary funds resulted from trying to combat these rebellions. Due to an ardent need of raising revenue for the micro wars, Charles I called a Long Parliament into order. This form immediately proceeded to impeach individuals as Villiers and other royal-nobility members under Charles’ jurisdiction. The likes of William Laud and Thomas Wentworth were then executed as Parliament established the Triennial Act, forcing the king to call the Parliament into session once every three years. The first progressions into the English Civil War is seen in this moment, with the accumulation of rebellions and prior issues with the Parliament, when Charles
I constructed an army for the sole reason of counteracting the Parliament and to maintain his absolute rule (*Brit*).

England was to be divided into two distinct forces: those siding with the monarch and those siding with the Parliament. The latter, however, lacked a proper army and thus in March 1642 passed the Militia Ordinance, which concentrated every existing militia within the English kingdom to the control of Parliament. This very act conveyed the hostility between the Parliament and the royalty as it was passed without any Royal consent, a blasphemy considered condemnable by death under normal circumstances (*Brit*). Parliament was circumspect in initiating a civil war. In June 1642, the two entities met at York and Parliament presented the Nineteen Propositions, which limited the king’s ability to control religion and the standing army. War would then erupt when Charles I rejected these proposals on August 22, 1642.

Underneath the evident problems, the religious differences within England served to establish the conditions that created the division between the adherents of Parliament and those of the monarch. The underlying problem with regards to religion was that, like other European nations, England experienced a sharp division between Roman Catholics and the Protestants. Charles I unlike the majority of the populace who were stringent Protestants, preferred a High Anglican Church within England. This sect, however, shared multiple similarities to Catholicism such as the exaltation of bishops, priests, ceremonies, and rituals. Inevitably, Charles cultivated a liking for the Catholics due to their shared beliefs and even proceeded to marry a Catholic, Henrietta Maria of France (*History*). Although religious autonomy was an established custom, Charles instilled cynicism and an acute distrust within the hearts of the population upon endeavoring to establish the High Anglican Church as the uniform religion of his kingdom. The House of Commons and the non-Royal denizens were all Protestants; years prior to Charles’ rule,
Queen Mary implemented draconian policies that heavily persecuted the Protestants, and hence the populace grew fearful of Charles’ growing admiration for the Catholics. This distrust, however, did not serve to directly guarantee the emergence of the English Civil War. Rather, it strained the relationship between prominent members of the House of Commons and King Charles who, as described beforehand, manipulated the Parliament (*History*). The political issues surrounding England were the impetus to drive the English Civil War; these religious differences mainly issued sentiments of distrust between the two major entities of the civil war, but were not the primary factors that caused an eruption to occur within the nation.

The English Civil War, lasting from 1642 to 1651, was a nation-wide conflict resulting from stark differences in the beliefs of the monarch’s power. In the end, however, Parliament’s forces proved to be a more effective unit, with its leader Oliver Cromwell, successfully routing Charles’ army, ultimately leading to the latter’s execution. When analyzing the circumstances prior to the eruption of these series of wars, it is evident that both religious differences and the political issues between the monarch and Parliament served to cause such a conflict to take place. However, religious differences merely served to imbed distrust between the royalty and the commoners; through Charles’ actions of limiting Parliament’s powers and to direct absolute power within his own hands, the gentry became fearful of possibility of “taxation without representation,” the ability of Charles to impose any taxes- and other policies- without the careful consideration of any representative body. The imminent dangers that could result from a shift in power engendered these sharp sentiments of rebellion and fear amongst the populace, and thus corroborating that the degrading political condition of England was the primary factor in allowing the English Civil War to take place.
Works Cited

