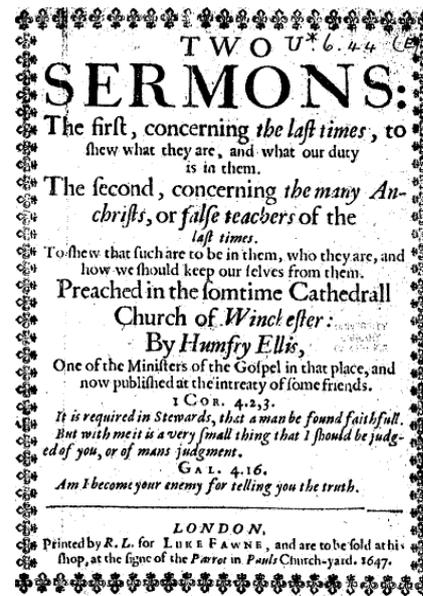


Humphry Ellis and the Antichrists

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It is not to be expected that Winchester Cathedral should celebrate the memory of Humphry Ellis. After all he formed part of an aberration. Ellis served in the late 1640s in war-ravaged Winchester at what was then described as the *former* cathedral church at a time when the Church of England, its leaders, government and administration had all been set aside in the turbulent years of the English Civil Wars. The Anglican church, still tainted with its association with the hated Archbishop Laud and viewed as a Royalist bastion, was singled out for special attack. Bishops and archbishops were dispossessed in 1646. Bishop Walter Curle of Winchester was ejected in that year and died a private man in rural obscurity in 1650. Cathedrals now functioned only as preaching houses not as diocesan flagships, and as buildings some of them (Winchester included) were damaged during the period of fighting. Compared with Lichfield and Carlisle, however, which were semi-destroyed, the actual structure of Winchester cathedral remained essentially intact. Houses in the Close suffered most. But within the cathedral itself windows, mortuary chests, statues, the organ, and books were all vandalised; iconoclasm was official government policy from August 1643. Nor was this the end of the attacks on cathedrals. Deans and chapters were abolished in April 1649 and their lands confiscated, chiefly to raise money for the army and navy. John Young, Dean of Winchester, was obliged to retire to his farm at Exton in the Meon Valley in that year and died in 1654. A proposal to demolish all cathedrals was seriously debated in the House of Commons in 1651.¹

In the ecclesiastical vacuum which emerged in the 1640s Presbyterians and Independents, the mainstream puritan parties, jostled for a new supremacy and alongside them a plethora of more radical religious groups, among them Baptists, Seekers, Fifth Monarchists, and (later) Ranters and



Quakers, came into the open in these fluid and mobile times and attracted fluctuating but enthusiastic followings. Some contemporaries thought they were living in the last age before Christ's long-awaited second coming and with some justification, alarmed or exhilarated as the case might be, believed that the world as they knew it was being turned upside down.²

Ellis, a moderate Presbyterian who later conformed to the re-established Anglican church after the Restoration and died in 1687 after serving for more than two decades as rector of Mottistone on the Isle of Wight, was one of them. Deeply troubled by the upheavals, de-stabilisation and competing tendencies he saw all around him Ellis was encouraged to put into print two of his sermons on the second chapter of St John's first epistle which he had recently preached in the (former) cathedral. Dedicated to the Parliamentarian County Committee of Hampshire, to whom Ellis was indebted for his removal to this county and subsequent advancement here, these sermons centred on chapter 2, verse 18. 'Little children, it is the last time, and as you have heard Antichrist shall come, even now there are many Antichrists, whereby we know it is the last time'. Ellis's preface expressed, perhaps conventionally, some nervousness about publication and he was insistent that even in desperate times the pulpit should not be used 'like a cockpit or fencing school'. He had real concerns about the so-called freedom of the press and its benefits - facilitated by the collapse of censorship previously administered by the monarchical state and the (now defunct) state church - and about the unstoppable flood-tide of religious publications, 'vain janglings, perverse disputings, evil surmisings' then under way, 'a principal cause of the increase of these sad divisions and distractions under which our kingdom at present labours'.³

National and local instability and religious confusion, Ellis was clear, went hand in hand. Like so many others in the mid seventeenth century, he believed strongly that religious toleration was something to be resisted not applauded. Truth was not a broad highway. All too many of those around him, he lamented 'are blown away by the blast of every vain and new opinion'. Pastors, self-evidently, had a major responsibility to stand firm in degenerate times, to defend their flocks, and to oppose false prophets. These antichrists, Ellis went on, betrayed their presence in obvious ways –

by their baseless, alluring promises, by separating themselves from communion with the godly, and by slandering godly ministers. Young christians, he recognised, were most at risk since their faith was insufficiently robust to resist undermining. Women, too, 'in whom passion is strong and judgement very weak', were often specifically targeted by these devils in disguise not simply on their own account but as a way of winning over their husbands. Surely the strongest defence against the modern antichrists, Ellis urged his listeners and hearers, was to stand together. A united church, anchored in the Gospel, was impregnable. As in war, it was the stragglers who could be picked off by the enemy.⁴

Ellis in these two sermons cited no names of dangerous, seducing individual false prophets. His chief concern was to alert his hearers/readers to the many religious errors and enticing strategies then in circulation against which all should be on their guard. Two years later, however, the noisy, self-advertising, deliberately outrageous, blasphemous Ranters burst upon the Hampshire scene, as they did in other places, London especially. The leader of the Hampshire group was William Franklin, born in Overton but apprenticed in London and practising his trade there as a rope-maker. Excluded in due course for his increasingly heretical ideas from the gathered East End puritan congregation to which he belonged, he returned to his native county. There, settling in Andover, he proclaimed himself the reincarnated Messiah and preached the antinomian doctrine that sin was impossible to the pure in heart, however licentious their lives. His adulterous, quick-witted, consort from London, Mary Gadbury, accompanied him and styled herself 'the Bride of Christ'. Franklin evangelised amongst the ranks of craftsmen, ex soldiers and others from the lower ranks and soon attracted a considerable following. A Ranter commune was established in a town notorious for weak government, an over-abundance of alehouses, and drunkenness. One of the Ranter group claimed to be the risen John the Baptist; others declared that they were healing and destroying angels. More seriously Franklin and Gadbury received encouragement from the weak-willed rector of the nearby parish of Crux Easton and his deluded wife. The parsonage there became Franklin's base. Authority was flouted and the more orthodox puritan clergy who challenged Franklin were defied or cursed.

Complaints against Franklin quickly multiplied, local JPs – among them Richard Cromwell, Oliver's son, newly established as a married man at the manor house in Hursley – sprang into action and the offenders were committed to prison to await trial at the Winchester Assizes.

Faced with such startling heresies and disturbing events, Ellis's earlier generalised rebuttal of false prophecy displayed in his two Winchester cathedral sermons was no longer adequate to meet the new crisis. He rushed into print in 1650 with a lengthy, highly specific account of this particular antichrist's outrageous but brief career.⁵ And he rejoiced in Franklin's fairly rapid exposure as a charlatan and in his ignominious fall and imprisonment. The lurid, sensational details of the Franklin case reported in Ellis's tract *Pseudochristus* may well have contributed to the passing only a few months later in August 1650 of a new Blasphemy Act by the interregnum government. Monarchy and the state church had been dismantled but those in authority were in no mood to allow socially subversive radical religion free rein.

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Notes

1 S.E.Lehmberg's *Cathedrals under Siege, 1600-1700* (Exeter, 1996) offers a useful general treatment of the subject. For the local experience of the 1640s upheavals see my essay on 'Winchester and the Civil Wars' in R.C.Richardson, *Social History, Local History and Historiography. Collected Essays* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2011), pp.45-58.

2 Much has been written about these teeming, confused, mid seventeenth-century times. See, for example, the classic account by Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down. Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (London, 1972), and – for a more recent study – Andrew

Bradstock, *Radical Religion in Cromwell's England* (London, 2011).

3 Humphrey Ellis, *Two Sermons, the first concerning the last times... the second concerning the*

many Antichrists or false teachers of the last times... preached in the sometime cathedral church of Winchester (London, 1647), preface.

4 *ibid*, pp.65, 71, 55, 56, 69, 74.

5 I have discussed these Ranters at much greater length in a forthcoming article.

(“Babels of profaneness and community”: the Ranter sensation in Hampshire and Wiltshire, 1649-51’, *Southern History*, 35 (2014).