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## When Did John Smyth Embrace ‘Arminianism’ – and Was the First Baptist Congregation ‘Particular’?

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### ABSTRACT

Unsurprisingly given his schooling in Elizabethan Puritanism, John Smyth’s early works show that he held to standard Calvinistic positions on election, reprobation, and original sin. By 1610 he had clearly repudiated these positions. This essay explores when and why he changed his mind. Textual evidence shows that he was still holding Calvinistic convictions when he baptised himself and the others, and then formed the first Baptist church in (probably) 1609. The reason for his repudiation of Calvinism some months after that is less certain, but I argue that it was probably down to an engagement with the Waterlander Mennonites that came after the baptisms. I therefore argue that, contrary to common report, the first Baptist congregation was ‘Particular’, not ‘General’, although it quickly changed, and that the long-standing question of whether the Mennonites had a significant effect on early Baptist development can be answered in the affirmative.

### KEYWORDS

John Smyth; Thomas Helwys; Baptist beginnings; General Baptists; Waterlander Mennonites

## Introduction

The beginnings of Baptist life are well-enough known: John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, and their Separatist church of about forty people were in exile in Amsterdam, when they came to be convinced that baptism should be given to professing believers only. Concluding on this basis that they were unbaptised, and so that their church could be nothing but a sham, they dissolved the fellowship, and then Smyth baptised himself, and then Helwys, and then the rest. They formed a new church, and this was the beginning of both the Baptist movement, and the General Baptist tradition, since the church that resulted was committed to broadly Arminian principles.

This story highlights a step in Smyth’s ecclesiological journey from, as Lee put it, puritan to Separatist to Baptist to Mennonite.<sup>1</sup> It also implies a second,

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<sup>1</sup>Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2003).

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soteriological, journey, from the assumed and committed Calvinism<sup>2</sup> of English puritanism and Separatism to the anti-predestinarian position of the Mennonites.<sup>3</sup> The former journey has been traced in, probably, every history of the Baptist movement; the latter has attracted far less attention. We have asked, that is, when the original General Baptist church became 'Baptist', but ignored or quickly dismissed the question of when it became 'General'. The earliest historian of the General Baptists, Adam Taylor, notes Smyth's 'declaring for the principles of the baptists [and] embracing the tenets of Arminius,' and gives some detail on the circumstances and timing of the former, but nothing beyond the bare acknowledgement of the change on the latter.<sup>4</sup> To take only one example from more recent histories, White, having discussed how Smyth came to repudiate infant baptism, simply comments '[t]here is no evidence how Smyth came at the same time to hold views later characterized by the name of the moderate Dutch Calvinist theologian Jacobus Arminius.'<sup>5</sup> I must myself admit to a similar lack of curiosity in an earlier publication.<sup>6</sup>

I do not here want to challenge standard foundational narratives in any serious way; my very narrow question is whether the church formed after the baptisms of 1609, under the renewed leadership of John Smyth, was in fact General/Arminian from the start, or whether their belief at their formation was Calvinistic/Particular, and they became General/Arminian a matter of weeks or months later. After arguing that the likelihood is that they did change after the baptisms and formation of a new church, I will ask, why the change, and what might it signify in terms of Baptist history?

### John Smyth and Predestination

John Smyth was probably born in Sturton-le-Steeple, Nottinghamshire.<sup>7</sup> He became a sizar at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1586, under the tutorship of

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<sup>2</sup>Whilst I times I will have cause to note the variety of predestinarian schemes (single predestination; double predestination; supralapsarianism vs infralapsarianism; ...) the details do not particularly matter to this essay, beyond the claim that all predestinarians believe at least that certain individuals are infallibly elected to salvation by God. The doctrine of perseverance (i.e. that someone truly elect cannot finally fall from grace) follows from this, and will also be important.

<sup>3</sup>The difference between Arminianism and the Mennonite position on soteriology will be important later in this essay. I will use 'Arminian' to refer to the positions advanced by Arminius in his *Verklaring*, and particularly the claims of Wtenbogaert's 1610 *Five Articles of Remonstrance*. I will use 'anti-predestinarian' as a very general term for any position which rejects the idea that God chooses certain people to be saved before all time.

<sup>4</sup>Adam Taylor, *History of the English General Baptists*, part first (London: T. Bork, 1812), 78 for the quotation, and 67–72 for the details on baptism.

<sup>5</sup>B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 24.

<sup>6</sup>... his decision, at about the same time, to embrace Arminian beliefs.' Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 16.

<sup>7</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, I am relying on Stephen Wright's entry in *ONDB* for biographical details here. For Smyth's theology, there are two relatively recent monographs: James R. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1991) and Lee, *Theology*, based on Lee's doctoral thesis, *The Theology of John Smyth* (Aberdeen PhD, 1999). Stephen Brachlow's, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology 1570–1625* (Oxford: OUP, 1988) remains useful. Brachlow engaged with Coggins, Douglas Shantz, and Barrie White over the central motif of Smyth's theology in a series of articles in this journal in 1984; whilst the nineteenth century German 'central dogma' theory of theological systems is, in my view rightly, today out of favour, the four articles remain helpful. Douglas Shantz, "The Place of the Resurrected Christ in the Writings of John Smyth," *BQ* 30, no. 5 (1984): 199–203; James R. Coggins,

Francis Johnson, who was then a fairly open presbyterian, and who embraced Separatist views later.<sup>8</sup> Smyth proceeded to his MA in 1593, and remained in Cambridge until 1598. He was ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln in the mid-1590s,<sup>9</sup> but was soon involved in controversy, taking the classically puritan side on various issues, including vestments.<sup>10</sup> He was elected to a lectureship (a non-parish preaching office) in Lincoln in 1600, but this rapidly became difficult, and he was removed from the office by the bishop in 1603, probably not entirely legally (he sought, and received, compensation through the courts, although he was not reinstated).

For the next few years he seems to have been based in Gainsborough, as his two daughters were baptised there, but he also appears to have taken a curacy at Clifton, near Nottingham, about fifty miles from Gainsborough, where he was charged with illegal assembly in 1604. In 1606 he was charged with preaching illegally, and it seems clear that he was feeling increasingly uncomfortable in the national church. He finally embraced Separatism around February 1607, and became pastor of a Separatist church in Gainsborough (which he had presumably started from amongst his supporters following his separation). Under persecution, and with much difficulty, the church illegally emigrated to Amsterdam in several stages through the latter half of 1607 and the beginning of 1608. The momentous event of the baptisms happened sometime between late 1608 and early 1609,<sup>11</sup> plunging Smyth into more controversy, this time with other Separatists. Within a few months, however, he was leading the majority of his congregation to explore union with the Waterlander Mennonites, having come to see them as a true church (a minority, led by Thomas Helwys, dissented and soon returned to England). Smyth died of tuberculosis before full union could be effected.

Smyth left numerous writings, not all of which were published in his lifetime.<sup>12</sup> Some are written to defend his various theological shifts; in the case

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"The Theological Positions of John Smyth," *BQ* 30, no. 6 (1984): 247–64; Stephen Brachlow, "John Smyth and the Ghost of Anabaptism: A Rejoinder," *BQ* 30, no. 7 (1984): 296–300; B.R. White, "The English Separatists and John Smyth Revisited," *BQ* 30, no. 8 (1984): 344–7.

<sup>8</sup>Johnson was expelled from the university for declaring his presbyterianism in a sermon in 1589. He took the pastorate of an English church in Middleburg in the Netherlands, where he came to embrace Separatist views, leading to a return to London and an acceptance of a pastorate there. Soon enough he was imprisoned; like a number of other Separatist leaders, he wrote extensively from prison. In 1597 he joined the exiled portion of his church in Amsterdam, returning to England to petition James VI of Scotland as he took the English crown. He was soon back in Amsterdam, and involved both in defending the Separatist movement, and in various disputes within his church. He died in Amsterdam in 1618. See Michael E. Moody, "Francis Johnson," *ONDB*.

<sup>9</sup>Wright, *ONDB*, appears to date his ordination to 'between 1584 and 1595'. This must be a typographical error; his ordination could not have preceded his matriculation. It should read 'between 1594 and 1595'.

<sup>10</sup>In this essay, and in common with fairly standard practice now, I will use 'Separatist' to denote those who had made a clean break with the Church of England, denounced it as a false church, and set up new, illegal, congregations, and 'puritan' to denote those who remained within the Church of England uncomfortably, agitating for more and faster reform, and fairly regularly engaging in illegal acts or omissions as their conscience dictated. Not every puritan became a Separatist, but few Separatists did not pass through a puritan phase.

<sup>11</sup>The best arguments for dating are from Anthony R. Cross, "The Adoption of Believers' Baptism and Baptist Beginnings," in *Exploring Baptist Origins*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Nicholas J. Wood (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010), 1–29, 8. Cross there gives reasons for preferring, without certainty, the 1609 date, which I find convincing.

<sup>12</sup>Whitley's modern edition is the most useful, not least because he published various works that were previously unpublished, or published only in English translation; I have cited seventeenth-century originals where possible,

of his views on predestination, however, we have to infer his views from chance comments, as he never wrote a work to explain and defend it. Fortunately this is fairly easy to do at every stage of his career. Of his early pre-Amsterdam works, I will engage with only one, *A Patterne of True Prayer*,<sup>13</sup> to demonstrate the possibility of discerning his predestinarian views from passing comments. I will then look closely at two 1609 works, which I will argue can be placed either side of the baptisms, to show that he was still assuming Calvinism after coming to baptistic convictions. Finally a reading of a brief 1610 confessional work will demonstrate his change of mind, and some features of his anti-calvinism, which will be useful evidence in exploring the reasons behind the change.

It is not a surprise that Smyth began his career holding to broadly Calvinistic doctrines of grace. The Elizabethan Church of England drew many of its bishops from the Marian exiles, who had lived and learned in Geneva, Strasbourg, Zurich, and other Reformed centres; as Wallace has argued convincingly, in the Elizabethan period (and for some years afterwards) a Reformed doctrine of grace was the common possession of the church; this only began to change under Charles I, with the Laudian movement.<sup>14</sup> There were exceptions, certainly; perhaps the most significant happened whilst Smyth was at Cambridge. Peter Baro (Pierre Baron) was a French Huguenot exile who held the Lady Margaret Chair of Divinity in Cambridge 1574–1596. In 1595 William Barrett, a Fellow of Caius College, had spoken against predestination, launching something of a controversy which finally led William Whitaker, the Regius Professor of Divinity, and the President of Queens' College, Humphrey Tyndal, to seek the help of Archbishop John Whitgift at Lambeth Palace.<sup>15</sup>

They returned to Cambridge with nine articles of faith, the 1595 Lambeth Articles, agreed between them and the Whitgift, which were to control the teaching of theology at Cambridge and which Tyndal and Whitaker believed upheld a traditional Calvinism. Baro had long been teaching that predestination was the result of divine foreknowledge of freely-chosen faith, and that salvation could be lost, and in January 1596 preached to this effect; charged with teaching against the Lambeth Articles, he argued that 'being dextrously understood,' they permitted his doctrine.<sup>16</sup> His chair was up for re-election later that year; he was not re-elected, and died in 1599.

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but also referenced Whitley. W.T. Whitley, ed., *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ's College 1594–8* (2 vols) (Cambridge: CUP, 1915).

<sup>13</sup>John Smyth, *A Paterne of True Prayer* (London: Felix Kingston for Thomas Man, 1605). *WJS* 1.67–247.

<sup>14</sup>Dewey D. Wallace Jr, *Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology 1525–1695* (Chapel Hill, UoNC Press, 1982); see, e.g. 79 for a summary statement to this effect.

<sup>15</sup>For this and what follows, see C.S. Knighton, "Peter Baro," *ODNB*; H.C. Porter, *Reformation and Reaction in Tudor Cambridge* (Cambridge: CUP, 1958), 376–90; Peter White, "The Cambridge Controversies of the 1590s," in *Predestination, Policy, and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War*, ed. Peter White (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), 110–17; Keith D. Stanglin, "Arminius Avant la Lettre": Peter Baro, Jacob Arminius, and the Bond of Predestinarian Polemic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 67 (2005): 51–74; Debora Shuger, "The Mysteries of the Lambeth Articles," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68 (2017): 306–25.

<sup>16</sup>Shuger, "Mysteries . . .," 306 for the quotation.

Baro's story indicates that anti-calvinism was not unknown, but also indicates that the church (and university) authorities were committed to a predestinarian, if not always to a Calvinist, position.<sup>17</sup> Unsurprisingly, the puritans and Separatists were, if anything, more committed to such doctrines than the authorities, but (outside of very occasional and individual controversies like that concerning Baro) there was not really a debate; predestination was certainly a subject Rome was in error on, and probably most thoughtful puritans/ Separatists knew that, but it was not one (before Charles and Laud) that the Church of England had made the wrong choice on, and so was no part of the standard litany of complaint. We can see this in Smyth's 1605 work, *A Paterne of True Prayer*.

*Paterne* was written whilst Smyth was still a puritan in the Church of England, and indeed was specifically intended to demonstrate that he had not embraced the Separatist doctrine that written prayers were unacceptable (although he cannot resist making the point that extempore prayer is better).<sup>18</sup> There is nothing specific in the text on the doctrines of grace, but he makes his assumptions clear at several points. For example, in discussing repentance he parenthetically notes that repentance 'is a thing altogether impossible to flesh and blood', and elsewhere refers to believers as 'the elect' and suggests that, were we able to know them, we would have no duty to pray for 'them that are reprobates'.<sup>19</sup> Although not dealing with the doctrine of election, these phrases demonstrate his commitment to double predestination. Again, expounding 'deliver us from evil' he insists on the doctrine of perseverance: 'perseverance followeth grace, and is a necessary consequent thereof... grace and perseverance are inseparable'.<sup>20</sup> He argues this on the basis that grace is a sure sign of divine election, and that, because of divine immutability, election can never change into reprobation, which is what a falling away from grace would imply. Given the text he is expounding, a denial of perseverance would be more natural: Christians pray for that which is uncertain, not for that which is inevitable, after all. His taking time to insist on and defend perseverance, then, is indicative of a commitment to a predestinarian doctrine.

Turning to 1609, I propose examining two works. One, a somewhat angry response to Richard Bernard (who had been a puritan with whom Smyth had

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<sup>17</sup>Shuger, "Mysteries ..." adduces historical evidence which, if correct, suggests that Whitgift brought in Andrewes and others to soften the hard Calvinism of the proposed articles from Cambridge to a position which asserted predestination to grace, but also that perdition was a result of merit (or lack thereof).

<sup>18</sup>Smyth, *Paterne*. Smyth asserts more than once (e.g. A2, A5, *WJS* I.68, 71) that his purpose in publishing the book was to clear his name in the face of 'unjust accusations' (A5, *WJS* I.71). In the preface, 'To the Christian Reader' he indicates that the accusations concerned Separatist views on the propriety of set prayers, but also his concern over formalism: 'I do here ingenuously confesse that I am far from the opinion of them which separate from our Church, convening the set forme of prayer (although from some of them, I received part of my education in Cambridge, *WJS* I.71) ... yet as Moses wished that all the people of God could prophetic, so doe I wish that all the people of God could conceive prayer ...' A5.

<sup>19</sup>Smyth, *Paterne*, 37, 40, 42. *WJS* I. 108, 111, 112.

<sup>20</sup>Smyth, *Paterne*, 154. *WJS* I. 220.

worked, but who withdrew back into conformity, rather than following Smyth into Separatism), entitled *Paralleles, Censures, Observations ...*, which dates, I shall argue, from before his change of mind on baptism;<sup>21</sup> the other, *The Character of the Beast ...* clearly comes from after that change of mind, since it is entirely a defence of it, against charges made by a fellow Separatist, Richard Clifton.<sup>22</sup> I should note that Lee has argued that *Paralleles* shows signs of his change of mind on baptism also; I do not find the textual evidence he adduces convincing, but note that, if he is correct, it only strengthens my present argument that Smyth held to Calvinist doctrines after the baptisms and the formation of a new, Baptist, church.<sup>23</sup>

In *Paralleles* Smyth several times speaks of 'the elect' as known only to God,<sup>24</sup> and speaks also once of those who are 'reprobate' but invisibly so.<sup>25</sup> He again asserts perseverance, giving his fourth characteristic of what makes a true saint as 'to continue to the end', which point he then defends by considering those (like Bernard, on his estimation) who showed signs of godliness but fell away. He takes the classic Calvinist line: 'they were not of the true visible Church, but were only Hipocrites'.<sup>26</sup> Election is in fact a major theme of the work in the sense that Smyth's arguments regularly turn on his acceptance that there are true saints, elected by God, in false churches, even the Church of Rome;<sup>27</sup> on this basis he accepts, more than once, that there are many in the Church of England who are amongst the elect, who he twice describes as 'a remnant according to the Election of grace,' citing Rom. 11:3–4, 1Ki. 19:10, and Rev. 18:4.<sup>28</sup> It is hard to suggest that such language could have come from someone who had given up on a Calvinist/predestinarian scheme.

That Smyth's *Character of the Beast* comes from his Baptist period cannot be doubted; the book is entirely a defence of believers' baptism against Richard Clifton. Clifton had once been a puritan Anglican priest, having first been disciplined for not observing saints' days, not wearing vestments, and refusing to sign the cross in (infant) baptism in 1591.<sup>29</sup> He was finally dismissed from his ministry for nonconformity in 1607, and embraced Separatism, becoming the leader of the church in Scrooby that John Robinson was to join, and that emigrated to Amsterdam with Smyth's Gainsborough church. Robinson took his church to Leiden and Clifton joined the 'Ancient Church' in Amsterdam, the oldest Separatist congregation of the day, then lead by Francis Johnson (Smyth's teacher from Cambridge days) and Henry Ainsworth. Smyth's *Character*

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<sup>21</sup> John Smyth, *Paralleles, Censures, Observations* (Middleburgh: R. Schilders, 1609). WJS II.327–546.

<sup>22</sup> John Smyth, *The Character of the Beast ...* (Middleburgh: R. Schilders, 1609). WJS II.563–680.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, *Theology ...*, 66–7.

<sup>24</sup> Smyth, *Paralleles*, 20, 35, 82, 90, 110. WJS II.360, 385, 473, 506.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 110. WJS II.506.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. WJS II.372.

<sup>27</sup> ... the Lord has his thousands even in the depth of popery ...' Smyth, *Paralleles*, 97. WJS II.485.

<sup>28</sup> Smyth, *Paralleles*, 87, 108 (whence the Scripture references). WJS II.469; 503.

<sup>29</sup> Biographical details are from Stephen Wright, "Richard Clifton," *ODNB*.

records an epistolary exchange between the two of them on the subject of baptism; Clifton later responded with his *Plea for Infants*.<sup>30</sup>

The debate need not concern us, except in one particular: Smyth repeatedly allows that any given infant may be among the elect, but insists that he can have no evidence of that, so cannot offer baptism. He speaks of ‘the secret election of God’ in this connection,<sup>31</sup> and repeatedly leans on this. Because God’s election remains secret until the flowering of faith, we cannot offer baptism to infants.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in rebuttal of the claim that, in denying baptism to infants, he is condemning them to damnation, he allows that infants may be elect, and so saved, but protests that he cannot know this of any given child, and so cannot baptise them.<sup>33</sup> The centrality of this argument to the entire treatise is eloquent testimony that Smyth remained committed to Calvinism when he wrote it. For further testimony he at one point discusses the case of ‘a man being invisibly elect & beloved of God’ entering into a false church.<sup>34</sup> Finally, he suggests that Clifton’s arguments result in a denial of limited atonement, and so must be wrong.<sup>35</sup>

When did Smyth cease to be committed to predestinarian ideas? The first evidence we have is the ‘Short Confession of Faith in XX Articles’ he offered to the Waterlander church in his bid to join them.<sup>36</sup> Lumpkin dates this to 1609 in his title, but his introductory narrative suggests the better date to be 1610, and this seems to be the date other authorities follow, so I think we may suggest a – very unfortunate – typographical error in Lumpkin’s title (and, indeed, table of contents).<sup>37</sup> A brief perusal of the document will demonstrate that Smyth has abandoned any form of predestinarianism; however, a more careful reading will drive my arguments in the next section, and so I offer some detail here.

Article 2 already makes the point, albeit parenthetically: God ‘has ordained all men (no one being reprobated) to life.’<sup>38</sup> Article 5 denies original sin: ‘there is no

<sup>30</sup>Richard Clifton, *The Plea for Infants and Elder People, Concerning their Baptism* (Amsterdam: Gyles Thorp, 1610). For an account of the debate, see William L. Pitts, Jr, “Baptist Origins and Identity in 1609: The John Smyth/Richard Clifton Debate,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36 (2009): 377–90.

<sup>31</sup>Smyth, *Character*, 16. WJS II.596.

<sup>32</sup>‘I dare not say this or that infant is not under the election of God, yet I dare say that never an infant in the Earth is actually sealed of the New Testament which is onely atteyned by confession of sinne & Faith ...’ Smyth, *Character*, 45. WJS II.640.

<sup>33</sup>‘... if it be objected that then wee doe condemne al infants dying before they be converted: I say No: wee pronounce nothing of infants, but leave the secret of them to the Lord, who has reserved secret things to himself ...’ Smyth, *Character*, 21. WJS II.603.

<sup>34</sup>Smyth, *Character*, 70. WJS II.677.

<sup>35</sup>‘... whereas you say natural corruption is not imputed to infants no more than to men beleiving, let it be so, & yet you cannot defend that without the opinion of universal redemption ...’ Smyth, *Character*, 46. WJS II.642.

<sup>36</sup>The original Latin, “Corde Credimus, & ore confitemur” is in Whitley, *Works REF*; an English translation was first published by Benjamin Evans in 1862, and is reprinted in Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 100–101. I will cite Evans’s translation (from Lumpkin) in the main body, but include the original Latin in the notes.

<sup>37</sup>Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 97 for the title; on 99 he describes a ‘petition’ being drawn up in 1610 asking for membership of ‘the Dutch Church’. The XX Articles are not the petition, but must be related to it. Probably the confusion comes from Burrage’s publication of the Latin text, which states it is ‘probably written early in 1609/10 by John Smyth’ (Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters*, II.178). This must mean it was written between Jan. 1st and Mar. 25th 1609 (old style) or 1610 (new style).

<sup>38</sup>‘... omnesque homines (nemine reprobato) ad vitam predestinasse.’



original sin, but all sin is actual and voluntary ... and therefore infants are without sin.<sup>39</sup> This is particularly striking, as he is here embracing a position that in *Character*, as we have seen, he thought was so unacceptable that proving it a consequence of Clifton's argument was an adequate refutation. He explains how he understands this to work in Article 9: Christ's redemption restores whatever human capacity was lost in Adam's fall, and so now human beings are able (with the help of the Holy Spirit, which is however, indiscriminately offered) to chose either to repent and believe, or to resist and perish. For good measure, Smyth denies justification by faith alone in Art. 10, insisting that a combination of the imputed righteousness of Christ and our own righteousness, arising from the sanctifying work of the Spirit, is what justifies us.

### The Causes of Smyth's Change of Mind

Clearly, then, Smyth became a Baptist before he denied predestinarianism; why did the latter change follow? We might meaningfully ask whether the two changes were connected: did he deny Calvinism because he denied infant baptism, or did he merely happen to make two fairly momentous moves in very close succession? We have no explanation from him of why he changed his mind over predestination, and so can only guess, but given the close temporal coincidence, we might propose that an account that explained how the latter shift was caused by the former one would gain some plausibility from that fact.

There are six proposals as to why Smyth left Calvinism behind in the literature. In his history, Underwood suggests (1) personal bible study; (2) the influence of Baro; (3) the influence of the contemporary Arminian debate; (4) the influence of the Mennonites.<sup>40</sup> White ignores the first of these, but briefly explores the other three.<sup>41</sup> Stephen Brachlow suggests a different possibility, that (5) Smyth came to see that the puritan/Separatist commitment to a conditional covenant led directly to both believers' baptism and a general atonement.<sup>42</sup> Coggins, finally, although mostly emphasising Mennonite influence, suggests that (6) revulsion at the despotism of James VI/I, and so the rejection of the ideal of a godly prince, drove Smyth to a rejection of any divine arbitrary rule.<sup>43</sup> Of course, various combinations of these reasons might be proposed – his discovery of the Arminian controversy leading to a recollection of Baro's mistreatment, for example – and we must certainly assume that whatever arguments he received from elsewhere were confirmed for him by his own reading of the Scriptures.

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<sup>39</sup>Nullum esse peccatum originis, verum omne peccatum esse actuale et voluntarium ... ideoque infantes esse sine peccato.

<sup>40</sup>A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: Kingsgate, 1948), 41.

<sup>41</sup>B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), 24.

<sup>42</sup>Brachlow, *Communion*, 150–6.

<sup>43</sup>Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation*, 142–4.

Brachlow's argument (5) may, I think, be safely set aside. If there was a pressure within a core element of puritan/Separatist theology to anti-predestinarianism, we would expect to see many puritans/Separatists repudiating Calvinism; in fact, Smyth is unique. On historical grounds we may assert that the tradition did not tend towards his conclusions, however ingenious Brachlow's proposals are. Similarly, there is simply no evidence for Coggins's anti-royalist argument (6), and it is vulnerable to a similar criticism: if a despotic monarch shook confidence in divine sovereignty, why did only Smyth (and his congregation) come to surrender that doctrine? I am also inclined to minimise the influence of Baro (2): there is no evidence at all that Smyth was struggling with the doctrines of grace before 1609, and considerable evidence that he accepted them fairly unreflectively, so it is hard to believe that he had a lingering sense of injustice from 1596; perhaps something else stirred the memory and it was not irrelevant, but it is hard to see how it could have been the main driver.

This leaves us with three options: (1) personal study; (3) Arminius; and (4) the influence of the Mennonites. The latter two have the advantage of making sense of the timing – they offer an account of why this question might have become an issue for Smyth in 1609; they also offer a helpful set of tests: we know the sorts of arguments and concerns that both the Arminians and the Mennonites had, and that they were rather different. If we can match Smyth's language, arguments, and concerns fairly closely to one or the other, then that will be strong evidence for influence; if we cannot, his own personal bible study (1), becomes a strong contender by a process of elimination.

Regarding proposed Arminian influence, White wrote '[i]t is also clear that no-one with any theological interest at all could avoid being aware of the controversy raging in the Netherlands at the time ...'<sup>44</sup> If true, that would seem to provide an adequate reason for Smyth's re-examination of the questions, at least. But is it true? The debate between Gomarus and Arminius had ignited almost as soon as the latter took his chair in Leiden in 1603, but it seems to have remained relatively local, being addressed at provincial rather than national level, until Wtenbogaert published the *Five Articles of Remonstrance* in 1610. It is possible that Robinson, being in Leiden, alerted Smyth to the debate, but we have no evidence of that. It is certainly also possible that Smyth had seen and read Arminius's *Verklaring*, but he gives us no indication of the fact, and the debate was not in 1609 the major national issue it had become by about 1612.<sup>45</sup> If there is no linguistic or conceptual evidence that

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<sup>44</sup>White, *History*, 24.

<sup>45</sup>For a helpful examination of the theological and political factors that shaped some of the debates, see Jan Rohls, "Calvinism, Arminianism and Socinianism in the Netherlands until the Synod of Dort," in *Socinianism and Arminianism: Antitrinitarians, Calvinists and Cultural Exchange in Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Martin Mulsow and Jan Rohls (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 3–48. The best history of the developing debate remains A.Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeuzen: Kerk en kerkvolk ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarnevelt* (Franeker: Van Wijnen, 1998<sup>3</sup>), which covers the period 1609–1619; the fact that van Deursen begins his history in 1609 is already good evidence that Smyth could have been entirely unaware of the debate to that year, and the details of the history only confirm that.

this debate shaped the thinking of Smyth or his church, then we might feel justified in discounting it.

Lee makes a careful argument, based on close textual reading, that what drove Smyth's change of mind was a conviction that the doctrine of original sin was both offensive to an account of divine goodness, and an insult to Christ's redemption.<sup>46</sup> If we are looking to choose between Arminian and Mennonite influence, this seems decisive: the *Remonstrance* clearly affirms original sin,<sup>47</sup> whereas contemporary and local Mennonite texts clearly deny it.<sup>48</sup> We do not need to agree with every interpretative decision Lee makes to accept that it is clear that Smyth denies original sin forcibly, and so to propose that the influence driving his anti-predestinarianism was Mennonite, not Arminian.

Wickman has recently argued that this may be proved convincingly, as, on his telling, Smyth borrowed a proof-text, Ez. 18:20, from the Mennonites, which text was never deployed by the Arminians.<sup>49</sup> The problem with this argument was that the text was not, at least on Wickman's showing, deployed by the Mennonites either – and I have not been able to find an example. He reaches back to the Hutterite leader Peter Riedemann (1506–56), and a work published in 1540, for the use of this text, which he then describes as '... the most distinctive marks of the Anabaptist views on original sin – use of the Ezekiel 18:20 proof-text.'<sup>50</sup> I do not pretend to know how extensive the use of this text was in Anabaptist discussions more broadly, but it is certainly absent from the 1580 Waterlander Confession of de Ries and Gerrits, although Wickman claims, without argument, that the teaching of that confession depended on Riedemann.<sup>51</sup> It is of course not impossible that Smyth accessed Riedemann through the Waterlanders, and so that Wickman's reconstruction is accurate. His argument, however, is that shared use of Ez. 18:20 demonstrates continuity, and therefore the influence of the Mennonites on Smyth; this is very hard to accept without further textual evidence, showing Waterlander use of this text in this way.

All that said, the case for Smyth's move to an anti-predestinarian position depending on Mennonite influence, rather than Arminian influence, seems strong. Wickman's proof-text is unconvincing, but the broader doctrinal point concerning the repudiation of original sin seems solid. There is an interesting line of corroboration in Helwys's developing response to Smyth's attempt to join the Waterlanders. He first offered a confession, in Latin, in February/

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<sup>46</sup>Lee, *Theology* ... , 196ff.

<sup>47</sup>Art. I '... ghevallene sondighe Menschelyck ...' = '... humano in peccatum prolapso ...' in Bertius's 1616 translation. Texts taken from 'Articuli Arminiani, sive, Remonstratia' in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom Vol. III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 545–9, 545.

<sup>48</sup>See, e.g. Arts IV & V of the 1580 Confession of John de Ries and Lubbert Gerrits (E.T. in Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 44–66). Gerrits, on his death-bed, finally convinced his fellow Waterlanders to accept the remnants of Smyth's congregation into fellowship, albeit after Smyth's own death. Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, I. 249–50.

<sup>49</sup>Eric Wickman, "General Baptist Origins and Original Sin," *BQ* 51 (2020), 47–55; 54.

<sup>50</sup>Wickman, "Original Sin," 49 for Riedemann; 53 for the quotation.

<sup>51</sup>Wickman, "Original Sin," 49.

March 1610, presumably in rapid response to Smyth's XX Articles,<sup>52</sup> which confession clearly denies original sin. Very similarly to the 1580 Waterlander Confession, Helwys teaches that Adam's fall does infect his descendants, but Christ's redemption heals that infection. On this basis, 'there is no sin by means of birth from our parents.'<sup>53</sup>

Fairly quickly, however, Helwys (and his little congregation) withdrew from these conclusions to some extent. In their 1611 'Declaration of Faith' they continue to insist that 'al are made righteous. Rom. 5:19. Al are made alive, I Cor. 15:22' by Jesus' work,<sup>54</sup> but they add that 'notwithstanding this Men [*sic*] are by nature the children of wrath, Ephes. 2:3. borne in iniquitie and in sin conceived. Psal. 51:5.'<sup>55</sup> As a result 'fallen' human beings '[have] all disposition unto evill, and no disposition or will unto anie good.' Only grace can save us, but God gives grace to all, and 'man may receive grace, or my reject grace ... '<sup>56</sup> Helwys and his followers, that is, have found their way to a place that is recognisably Arminian.<sup>57</sup>

I am not currently aware of any proposed account of this move of Helwys's in the literature, and it does demand explanation.<sup>58</sup> The *Remonstrance* was published after the Amsterdam baptisms and before Helwys's 1611 'Declaration'; a historical sequence is not adequate evidence for causation, but, in the absence of any other proposed explanation, it might be the most plausible reconstruction that we can offer, and the fact that several of the positions reached are not merely anti-predestinarian but are recognisably Arminian only strengthens the argument.

## Conclusion: Implications for Baptist Historiography

I have argued that the Smyth-Helwys church in Amsterdam remained Calvinist until some time after its dissolution, the baptisms, and its reconstitution in 1608–9. I have further argued that the anti-predestinarian position developed

<sup>52</sup>The Latin text can be found in Burrage, *Early English Dissenters*, II.182–4; an English translation has recently been published: Antony D. Rich, "Thomas Helwys' First Confession of Faith 1610," *BQ* 43 (2009), 235–41.

<sup>53</sup>Art. 4, tr. Rich; Lt: 'nullum sit peccatum per generationem a parentibus nostris.'

<sup>54</sup>'Declaration of Faith' in Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 116–23, Art. 3, p. 117.

<sup>55</sup>'Declaration' Art. 4; Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 117.

<sup>56</sup>'Declaration' Art. 4; Lumpkin, *Confessions*, 118.

<sup>57</sup>Lumpkin claims that the Declaration is 'anti-Arminian in its views of sin and the will' (*Confessions*, 115). Placed alongside the *Remonstrance*, however, it is difficult to see where he gets this judgement from. Compare, for example on the will, 'Declaration' Art. 4: '... now being fallen, and haveing all disposition unto evill, and no disposition or will unto anie good, yet GOD giving grace, man may receive grace ...' with *Remonstrance* Art III: '... in statu apostasiae et peccati nihil boni (quod quidem vere bonum sit, cujusmodi in primis est fides salvifica) ex se et a se potest cogitare, velle aut facere; sed necessarium est ut a Deo, in Christo, per Spiritum ipsius Sanctum regeneretur ...'

<sup>58</sup>Wickman notices the move, although locates it after Helwys had returned to England, and so later than it in fact happened. He suggests that 'Helwys's brief flirtation with a complete rejection of original sin was primarily a conciliatory move towards the Waterlander Mennonites.' This might imply that the change of mind came when Helwys gave up on hopes of fellowship with the Mennonites, but the Baptists in England continued to seek communion with the Waterlanders for the next couple of decades, long after Helwys's death, indeed, so this seems implausible.

by Smyth was recognisably influenced by the Mennonites, and that Helwys, whilst initially also adopting a recognisably Mennonite position, by 1611 moved to a visibly Arminian position. This much seems solidly established in the textual record. I have further suggested possible reasons for these shifts involving contact with the Mennonites, and then Helwys becoming aware of, and presumably convinced by, the nascent Arminianism of the *Remonstrance*.

There is a longstanding, and often largely sterile,<sup>59</sup> debate over the significance of Anabaptism, and particularly the Mennonites, in the story of Baptist origins. The investigations above enable us to specify two key elements of that story with some exactness. First, *the Mennonites had a profound effect on Baptist beginnings, being the cause of the Smyth-Helwys church abandoning its Calvinism*. Because of the distinctively Mennonite doctrines the church announced in its first confessions, we can be certain of this. Of course, we cannot judge historical counter-factuals, and so cannot know if Smyth and/or Helwys would have been convinced by the *Remonstrance* without previous Mennonite influence, or would have nonetheless reached anti-predestinarian views by another route, but if we cannot answer the question of how influential the Mennonites were in making the Smyth-Helwys church Baptist, we can be sure that they were instrumental in making it 'General'.

Second, however, *the division between Smyth and Helwys rapidly included the question of whether to accept a Mennonite anti-predestinarianism, or to embrace a Reformed version (i.e. Arminianism); the General Baptists came from the Reformed side of this division*. The General Baptist tradition begins with a rejection of Anabaptism, which is first structural (Helwys's refusal to seek union with the Mennonites) and then theological (Helwys's abandoning of Mennonite/Anabaptist anti-predestinarianism and embracing of Arminianism). As Baptists, our future is for us to decide, or so the General Baptists would have us believe, but our roots are Reformed.

## Notes on contributor

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<sup>59</sup>A judgement White was already making in 1984. White, "English Separatists ...," 344.