

SOME ADVICE TO A DOMESTIC CHAPLAIN IN 1663

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INTRODUCTION

A letter preserved among the papers of the Phelips family of Montacute provides a rare insight into the duties and status of domestic chaplains during the turbulent Restoration period.¹ The letter takes the form of advice from the Revd John Oliver, formerly vicar of Montacute, to the Revd William Carslake on his appointment as domestic chaplain to the Hungerford family. The text of the letter is given at the end of the paper.

JOHN OLIVER

John Oliver, author of the letter and the advice which it contains, had some experience upon which to call in writing to his colleague the Revd William Carsdale, since in 1663 Oliver was serving as chaplain to the dowager Countess of Carlisle in residence with her at Waltham Abbey.² Moreover, Oliver appears to have fulfilled the role of chaplain in the Phelips family at Montacute between 1650 and 1661, when he was vicar of Montacute.³ Some glimpses of the role he played in the Phelips family are given in a small bundle of papers remaining from his time at Montacute.⁴ According to these papers, Oliver had previously held posts as minister at St Albans, Hertfordshire, and at Cliffe in Kent before his appointment to Montacute during the Interregnum. It is clear, both from his appointment to Montacute in 1650, and from his ejection from it at the Restoration, that Oliver was not a conforming Anglican cleric. During the Interregnum, both parish clergy and domestic chaplains were ejected from their livings by the Council, which exercised power in the Commonwealth. Only those peers and gentry who received the sanction of the Council could maintain their chaplains.⁵ Evidence from John Oliver's papers whilst at Montacute suggests that he had connections with Quakers in Somerset and Cornwall. His association with William Carslake, newly-appointed chaplain to Edward Hungerford (the son of a leading Parliamentarian, and MP for Chippenham) suggests that his connections were largely those of the Puritan-Parliamentarian nexus. Whatever his theological hue, Oliver was a trusted advisor of the Phelips family. Anne Phelips used Oliver's sermons as religious exercises and as a method of systematic examination of *Hebrews* and other Biblical texts.⁶ Moreover, in 1659 John Oliver used 'Directions to a Young Student going to The University' in the education of Edward Phelips.⁷

THE ROLE OF A DOMESTIC CHAPLAIN

Since the statutory recognition of the status of domestic chaplains to the nobility, and of the privilege of dispensation to hold two benefices in plurality in 1530, the positions of chaplains had become controversial. After his accession, Charles I, aided by Archbishop Laud, had attempted to restrict the numbers and activities of domestic chaplains. The Court perceived that chaplains operated outside the hierarchy of the Church, independent of episcopal oversight, and were prone to identification with the often idiosyncratic political and religious views of their patrons. This placed them, in some cases, dangerously close to the Puritan opposition to the royal regime. As a result, in 1629 the King issued instructions to the Church which attempted *inter alia* to restrain chaplains and other clergy from preaching, and to limit the licensing of chaplains and the consecration of private chapels. In Bath and Wells diocese, particularly under Bishop William Piers, these regulations, though having no canonical or statutory status, were implemented rigorously.⁸ The attempt to limit the activities and numbers of chaplains was a failure largely because a significant corps of independent nobility and gentry flouted the regulations and continued to harbour chaplains, and in the case of some Puritan peers to provide systematic support.

Domestic chaplains in the 17th century were in an anomalous position. As Oliver makes clear, they walked a difficult path between intimacy and servility in their relations with their patrons and their patrons' families. Oliver's concern regarding the possibility of familiarity between Carslake and the Hungerford family reflected the lowly status of chaplains in the period. This would particularly be the case with Carslake, since his status as chaplain to a member of the gentry (rather than of the peerage) did not confer upon him any privilege to hold a benefice in plurality, and left him financially dependent on the Hungerfords. As a result, chaplains were viewed as rather closer to the servants than to the family. In the early 18th century John Hildrop visited one Somerset house in which the chaplain had 'laid aside his sacerdotal character' and fulfilled the duties of valet, butler and game keeper to his household.⁹ The advice to Carslake not to keep his hat on, and to walk behind his patron also suggests that it was important to maintain a respectful attitude towards a patron.

The enjoinder not to speak at table also reflected contemporary mores. The literature of the 17th and early 18th century is littered with references to the importance of a chaplain's demeanour, particularly at the dining table. In 1710, Richard Steele recounted in *The Tatler* the experiences of a chaplain dismissed from his post for remaining to eat the pudding and indicated that it was expected that the chaplain should 'fly away from dessert'. Puddings were regarded as especially frivolous foods, and therefore not suitable for men of the cloth.¹⁰ A further danger of familiarity 'to females', of which Oliver warned Carslake, presented a significant difficulty for chaplains. There were a number of scandals in the second half of the 17th and early 18th centuries caused by chaplains marrying into the family they served. For the daughter of a gentry or noble family such a marriage was considered a disgrace. In 1662, the Verney family was shocked by the marriage of the Earl of Lindsey's sister to his chaplain, the Revd Dr Hewitt, who they noted was 'but a chaplain'.¹¹

The duties of a chaplain were many and various, but clearly included the prayers and sermons referred to by Oliver. The concern he notes to avoid controversial subjects was a critical issue in 1663. The times were awash with religious controversy: the Savoy Conference of 1661 had failed to settle the reconciliation of the Presbyterians with the liturgical re-establishment of the Church of England following the Restoration of Charles II; the Act of Uniformity of 1662 required all clergy to swear loyalty to Charles II and to accept the new prayerbook, but two thousand clergy resigned their livings rather than

accept the new King and liturgy; and the forcible ejection of nonconformist divines from the parishes and livings they had occupied during the Interregnum reached its height in 1663. Only those clergy who could be assured of the religious views of the family they served could afford to speak freely. Moreover, the theological tone of the family needed to be carefully gauged so as not to give offence. Thus for example, Oliver notes in his advice to Carslake that he should check whether the Lord's Prayer was acceptable for the Hungerfords. The advice that neighbours and acquaintances should not be invited to the family services was an important matter. Laying aside issues of a patron's views, services in a domestic chapel might be tolerated by the authorities for the private worship of a family, but if they attracted other local people they became open to the interpretation of being an illegal conventicle, which would attract the censure of both Church and State, and possibly prosecution.

TEXT OF JOHN OLIVER'S LETTER TO WILLIAM CARSLAKE, 1663

Editorial Note

John Oliver's letter, dated 'From Waltham Abbey', 13 July 1663, survives as a contemporary transcript among the papers of the Phelps family. The purely personal elements of the letter have been omitted here, as have Oliver's theological reflections. Abbreviations have been extended and contractions expanded.

1. Then, though man be ζῶον πολιτικόν, and therefore tis almost intolerable not to be sociable, yet (for many considerations too long to rehearse) you must deny your selfe a great while of any familiarity with any in the family except such of whose godlynes you have evident proofes.
2. . . . Let your conversation bee exceeding grave, and your words few, but alway such as may minister grace to the hearers.
3. Aspire to bee chiefly the companion of your patron Mr Hungerford viz. by observing carefully his humour, whether it will admit of familiarity. (This will breed you respect in the family). If it will, cherish it, by observing all hints given of religious discourse, by beginning such discourse your selfe when you find him rightly disposed, but be sure your discourse be pertinent, serious and pithy. And in your gestures and compellations use all possible respect and bee not often nor easily persuaded to sit and talke to him with your head covered, nor to walke with him except desired, nor then with an equall pace; nor speake much at table, unlesse a question be ask't and then despatch it briefly and bee very sparing in betraying your credulity in relating things incredible, and of giving suspicion of your discretion, by drawing out a story at length. Bis dat qui cito, is especially true in all apocryphall relations.
4. Carry your selfe exceeding courteously in posture and speech to the meanest of the family, but familiarly to none especially to females, seeing the most innocent mirth or complaisance with them, brings either an ill report, or some other inconvenience.
5. For prayer bee carefull to consider some time before, bee full, briefe, fervent therein. Beg preservation...for the head of the family, (without naming him)¹² and a blessing on all persons and concernments in the family, and once in 2 or 3 days (if you please, in a forenoone) conclude with the Lords prayer, unlesse the use of it bee there disgusted. . . .
6. If you preach. Bee not venturous [as] on a pulpit in the country, considering that you are now bound to consult the quiet and conveniency of your patron under whose wings you have shelter, and that such an action of yours would greatly reflect on him to whom you are related. When you are to preach in the family, as you must not suddenly seek or embrace to, you must not on your owne head call in any neighbour

acquaintance whatsoever without leave. Meddle as little as possible may bee with any thing of the times or if you needs must, either in prayer or preaching, let it bee onely in such generall termes as none can take offence, or so spirituall and metaphoricall if it may bee that none but the godly wise, who will not be offended can understand; but whither more littell or spirituall, let your expressions about such things bee few and scripturall, and then you are safe. Neither in your preaching reflect on the concernments of the family till you have spent a yeare or two among them. The circumstances coherences and intrigues of domestick affaires are not learned in a few weeks, and therefore twere very imprudent to pronounce any thing of them, especially in a sermon, for qui ad pauca respicit, ex facili pronunciat. Trust not to old sermons by any means, at least ordinarily, least you incurre the curse of God on those that doe his worke negligently....

. . . I find my life comfortable under the favour of one of the wisest and most pious ladyes in England, and have now so well discovered the constitution of our family, that I trust I am not altogether unprofitable in my labours among them....I have endeavoured with that constant seriousnes to discharge my duty, that my good Lady, (for whom you should ever pray) is pleased to hold on her courteous obliging carriage to mee; and the family have somewhat abated of their first prejudices and disobliging returns...¹³

REFERENCES

1. The manuscript is in the Somerset Record Office (SRO, DD/PH 205, f. 142 *et seq.*).
2. The Act permitting the nobility to appoint chaplains was passed in 1530 and allowed dowager peeresses to appoint two chaplains (21 Henry VIII, c. xiii).
3. A.G. Matthews (ed.), *Calamy Revised* (Oxford, 1934), 373. There is some debate over who was the vicar of Montacute, since Calamy records both Oliver and Charles Darby as having been ejected from Montacute at the Restoration; it seems more likely that Darby was vicar of Kingsbury Episcopi and later of Huish Episcopi (Matthews, *Calamy Revised*, 157).
4. SRO, DD/PH 205.
5. For example, Sir Norton Knatchbull of Mersham received such permission in 1656 (A.G. Matthews (ed.), *Walker Revised* (Oxford, 1948), 191).
6. 'Mistris Phelipps's booke' is in SRO, DD/PH 205.
7. This item is also in SRO, DD/PH 205. The 'Advice' was written by the Revd William Thomas, rector of Ubley.
8. J. Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church* (Oxford, 1992), 131–42.
9. J. Hildrop, *The Contempt of the Clergy Considered in a Letter to a Friend* (1729), 25–30.
10. 'The Miseries of a Domestic Chaplain in 1710', *The Tatler*, 255 (23 November 1710).
11. F.P. Verney and M.M. Verney (eds), *Memoirs of the Verney Family during the Seventeenth Century* (1907), 1, 187.
12. There does seem to have been some reticence on the part of patrons to receive such public prayers. Lord Halifax was reputed to be furious in 1683 when his chaplain, Mr Mompesson, publicly prayed for his health (Bodleian Library, Tanner Ms 25, f. 33).
13. The Dowager Countess of Carlisle had been widowed in 1660, and thus qualified to appoint two chaplains. It seems likely that the new Earl of Carlisle disapproved of his mother's nonconformist chaplain, particularly since the Earl sought office in the Restored royal government. He was subsequently ambassador to Russia and governor of Jamaica. Lady Carlisle, a daughter of the Earl of Bedford, subsequently married the Earl of Manchester in 1667.

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