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The Curious Case of the Camisards; or, the Fabrication of the French Prophets

A casual visitor to the Bunhill Fields cemetery in London on May 25th, 1708, would have been confronted with an extraordinary sight. A huge throng of curious onlookers had gathered around the grave of Dr. Thomas Emes, who had died less than six months earlier. It had been prophesied, ostensibly in the very words of God himself that Emes was going to rise out of his grave and be resurrected that day.2

As any number of pamphlets, articles and polemics could have attested to, this was the most famous prophecy supposedly channeled by what were dubbed the French Prophets, a small group of religious followers who had coalesced around immigrants from religious war in France and set up in London. The prophets, or inspirés, and their followers recounted stories of incredible miracles performed in the midst of a vicious guerrilla war in the Cevennes: prophets talking in their sleep, crying tears of blood, and walking unscathed across burning hot coals.

Something of the success of the dissemination of these stories was reflected by the crowd around Emes's gravesite. A contemporary estimate put the crowd size on May 25th at 20,000 people.3 But we may safely assume that the reason most of the onlookers came was not to see the fulfillment of the prophecy, but rather to glory in its failure. As a contemporary song, “An Epitaph on the French Prophet” put it:

“HERE likes a Prophet, who, as People Say/ Will rise again the Twenty Fifth of May;/But if he does, then I’ll be Hang’d that Day...Should he start up alive to Human eyes/I must confess would prove a Great surprise/But if he should not, the Prophet Lyes.”

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1 This is an abridged version of paper written for a seminar course given by Professor Ted McCormick at Concordia University in the fall of 2012. I am grateful for Prof McCormick’s guidance for this paper.
2 John Lacy, Predictions concerning the raising the dead body of Mr. Thomas Emes, (London: B. Bragge, 1708).
4 Ibid. 
5 An Epitaph on the French Prophet, who was to make his resurrection on the 25th of May, (Edinburgh: James Watson, 1709). The original date of publication is unknown. We have only a reprint from Scotland which we know was sold in 1709.
In any event, Emes did not rise on May 25th. Whether or not the surrounding audience heeded the above song's advice and took the opportunity to “[i]f Cheated, Piss on his Presumptive Clay” isn't known. Certainly a number of mocking pamphlets and broadsheets abounded after the fact, although they were hardly needed; the failure spoke for itself.

The events of May 25th represented the height (or nadir) of the French Prophet movement's brief existence in London. And yet there were actually very few of what were termed French Prophets present that day. Even if we accept that the number of 20,000 spectators is an exaggeration, the French Prophets never numbered more than a few hundred followers, and we know that many of them did not attend on May 25th. Hillel Schwartz notes that “more than a dozen” went to Bunhill.5

The relative absence of the French Prophets at their defining moment is telling. The thesis of this paper is that the existence of an extreme religious sect known as the “French Prophets” was largely the projection of critics seeking to discredit religious enthusiasm. Writers such as the George Keith, Marc Vernous, Richard Kingston, Francis Hutchinson, the Earl of Shaftesbury and anonymous pamphleteers gave a disproportionate amount of attention to very small group of religious followers, giving lurid accounts of their supposedly outrageous activities. This was because the existence of the French Prophets was convenient as a means of discrediting enthusiasm and personal revelation, and by contrast promoting a more sober, reason-based faith.

When the throngs of people converged onto Bunhill Fields, what came to be known as the French Prophets had only existed in London for slightly under two years. The arrival of just three Camisards--Elie Marion, Jean Cavalier and Durand Fage--immediately started drawing the attention of many detractors, and a few supporters. The anonymous author of the critical Clavis Prophetica remarked that “the Prophecies of the Camisars here in England, have of late made as much Noise, almost as the Military Exploits and Suffering a home.”6

The group's earliest publications are evidence of its small size. The English version of Le Théâtre Sacré des Cévennes, titled A Cry From the Desart, boasted of being able to provide only twenty-six witnesses in London, either auditory or visual, to the veracity of the movement.7 On

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6 Clavis Prophetica, (London: J. Morphew, 1707) preface. As with many pamphlets from the time, the preface was unpaginated.
the other hand, the attacks on the Prophets were numerous, ranging from pamphlets of a few
pages to much longer critiques of their prophecies, both of their veracity and the comportment of
the inspirés. But they tended to have one thing in common: most of the critics of the Prophets, at
least those who self-identified, gave no indication they'd actually ever witnessed the events they
were writing about. Richard Kingston, a Church of England minister, gave one of the most vivid
descriptions of a typical prophecy:

They turn'd round with great Violence, till being quite giddy they fell upon the Floor. When so
fallen, they roll'd their Eyes frightfully, look'd wild and ghastly, work'd their Lips in divers
Figures, drivel'd and foam'd at the Mouth, held their Breaths, heav'd their Breasts, puff'd and
swell'd their Throats, and sometimes lay as if they were in a Trance. Then on a sudden they would
start up, shake their Heads, Gulp and Hiccup strangely, clap their Hands, move their Feet odly,
shake their whole Bodies into Contortions, in the Nature of Convulsions. Then they would quake,
groan, laugh, belch, sigh, sing, shriek hideously; and at last, stretching their Mouths open, in a
yawning, distorted, dreadful manner, in a doleful Tone, and as loud as they were able, would utter
their Prophecies: And the Prophets now in England continue the same methods.8

The last sentence, taken with the rest of the text, makes it clear that Kingston was not working
with a firsthand account, but actually basing his work off of prior reports of the Camisard
prophecies in France. Others admitted they wrote prior to witnessing anything. John Humfrey,
whose (much gentler) critique of the Prophets was delivered in the form of letters addressed to
their most notorious member, John Lacy, admitted “The first letter of mine I wrote before I saw
anything of these agitations.”9 Francis Hutchinson also launched a scathing attack on Lacy, but
based it entirely off of Lacy's collections of prophecies. But even Hutchinson admitted “I cannot
say I have had the patience to read over all his books.”10

Marc Vernous, a Huguenot preacher in London during the period, gave a description of
the French Prophets and their agitations that gives us an idea of how stories about the Prophets
might begin to grow and circulate, relating a story based on very vague attribution, and then
turning into something more sinister:

We are told... one of these Prophets pushed on by a Spirit of Concupiscence, leaped from his Bed,
and as if he were all over possessed, accosted a young Woman in a Prophetic manner, who gave
him a bold Repulse. The Prophet being ashamed returned to his Bed, without prophesying to the

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10 Francis Hutchinson, A Short View of the Pretended Spirit of Prophecy, (Edinburgh: 1709) p. 55. This was a reprint
of an earlier edition.
young Woman any longer. We ought not to be surprized if, after this Misfortune, he believed it to be his Duty to imitate the Prophet Hosea, by a pretended Revelation from Heaven joining himself carnally to a Harlot.\footnote{Marc Vernous, \textit{A Preservative against the False Prophets of the Times} (London, 1708) p. 28.}

The group wasn't totally fictitious; there were writings by those who were called French Prophets: men such as John Lacy and Elie Marion published collections of prophecies, while others like Richard Bulkeley, Maximillien Misson and Nicolas Facio\footnote{More often known in the literature today as Nicolas Fatio de Dullier, he was almost always referred to as Nicolas Facio, and signed his name that way, hence the Facio usage in this essay.} defended them publicly. However, they somehow managed to provoke controversy apparently \textit{before} they had published their first set of works in the spring of 1707.

Efforts were made to portray the French Prophets as a dangerous sect, but their numbers suggest otherwise. Their identification as a cohesive group, at least in that first, very contentious year after the arrival of the first three Camisards to London, is tenuous at best and reflects the efforts of their critics to describe them as such for their own purposes.

They also didn't quite fit the bill of dangerous revolutionaries. The three original Camisards, fresh from war in France, could be seen as exotic, though they had originally approached the mainstream Huguenot community, who after a brief welcoming rejected them. But the rest of the early members, if we can call them that (notably, they never, or very rarely, called themselves “French Prophets”) were from a diverse background. Nicolas Facio, for example, was well-respected in London's scientific community at the time and had published mathematical and scientific treatises.\footnote{For example see \textit{Lineae brevissimi descensus investigatio geometrica duplex: cui addita est investigation geometrica solidi rotundi in quod minima fiat resistentia} (London, 1699).} He was also an unusually close friend of Sir Isaac Newton.\footnote{Several historians, including Gale E. Christianson, believe that Newton was perhaps sexually attracted to Facio. \textit{See Isaac Newton and the Scientific Revolution} (OUP, 1996).} Sir Richard Bulkeley, the group's benefactor, was a minor nobleman and playwright. The monstrous John Lacy was also respectably middle class Presbyterian.\footnote{Jane Shaw, \textit{Miracles in Enlightenment England} (Yale University Press, 2006) p. 150.}

By studying not simply the pamphlets and tracts written against the French Prophets, but also the prior works by the authors of these critical pamphlets, it becomes evident that many of the themes present in the attacks on the French Prophets were present in the earlier writings of these critical authors. Obviously we can't trace the prior writings of the anonymous critics. However the prior writings of the identified authors make it clear that these pamphlets were not
the product of a spontaneous, horrified reaction, inflamed by the difficulties the English were having in the War of the Spanish Succession. Instead, the writings against the Prophets were part of a larger religious agenda.

Richard Kingston wrote the longest attack on the French Prophets, two volumes that went into incredible, repetitive (not to mention incredibly repetitive) attempts to discredit the prophecies of Marion. Kingston had made something of a career out of attacking other groups which he saw as being threatening to the faith and the Crown. Kingston's stated philosophy was that to abandon the Church's teachings was an act of “abandoning wisdom and Providence of Heaven.” The result was “Anarchy and Confusion.” He'd written those words in 1702, referring to Atheists and Deists, but they fairly accurately encapsulate what he'd write about the French Prophets five years later, and for both groups, the cause was the same: they'd both departed from rational and scripture-based faith.16

Rightly or wrongly, Kingston, the Anglican minister, also had the habit of seeing plots everywhere. Equally lengthy as his broadside against the French Prophets was a 1698 work of over 300 pages, which sought to document in detail all of the plots against King William since his ascension in 1688. “Our enemies,” wrote Kingston, “are still so many.” By appearing to not be so many anymore, they were hoping that good Anglicans would “voluntarily drop the sword out of our hands.” Neither was that his only such work; he was constantly railing against frauds and impostors. Deviation from the established Church and threats to the state went hand and hand for Kingston, and there was plenty of both in his view. Another outlandish, dangerous sect springing up would have been vindication as well as fodder for Kingston's pen.17

George Keith, whose critique of the French Prophets was attached to a larger attack on Quakerism, had likewise engaged in the better part of a decade of defending the Anglican Church against fringe groups, particularly the one he used to belong to. In 1700, after a lengthy career arguing for the truth and piety of the Society of Friends, he renounced Quakerism and gradually became more critical of that group, while becoming an Anglican rector and delivering sermons about his newfound faith. He made a career out of his conversion, going as far as Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to attack various Quakers. His polemics against Quakerism emphasized the importance of adhering to the written word of God, and that truth and reason stemmed from them. After his conversion he would make the bold, and perhaps dubious claim he had been a

17 Richard Kingston, A True History of Several Designs... (London: Abel Roper, 1698) preface.
Quaker for three decades simply in the hope of attracting them towards true Christian faith.\textsuperscript{18}

If choosing a foil, or “other” to define one's own religion against was a well-worn tradition, then the arrival of the French Prophets provided a (proverbial) Godsend. While the meetings of the Quakers had once perhaps been foreign and shocking enough to draw a response, one of the critics of the French Prophets, John Humfrey, noted (and perhaps lamented) that “These Quakers are become so moderate.”\textsuperscript{19} The writer of a broadsheet echoed a similar sentiment, when talking about hysterical prophesying, “which the Quakers begun, yet left it off.”\textsuperscript{20} There was nothing particularly immoral about the behavior of the Quakers, as blasphemous as it may have been.

The most pronounced aspect of the French Prophets was their millenarianism; they preached on the imminent Second Coming and the final battle with the Anti-Christ. The oppressed would see their sufferings end soon, and the wicked would be mightily punished. The prophecies of Marion referenced vivid apocalyptic imagery, talking about fire raining down on London, and the establishment of a New Jerusalem in its place.\textsuperscript{21}

On the whole however, in this period millenarianism was by no means a fringe movement. In 1707 for example, William Whiston gave the thoroughly-respectable Boyle lecture, which was laden with millenarian imagery. Unlike the Prophets, who irresponsibly predicted the end of the world was imminent, Whiston saw it lasting all the way until 1716.\textsuperscript{22} But Whiston's was a respectable millenarianism that was rooted within the Anglican Church, as opposed to the supposedly crazed pronouncements of the French Prophets.

There was no great doctrinal gulf between the \textit{inspirés} and the Anglicans; and some later members were indeed Anglicans In the words of Hutchinson: “I do not know whether they have any false Doctrines, for they hardly have any Doctrines at all.” The group swore they did not have any intention of forming a sect. They were even receptive to communion, unlike the Quakers.\textsuperscript{23} If we accept that the critics hadn't even seen the Prophets in person, or had any doctrinal disagreements, there had to be another reason for the outcry.

The Earl of Shaftesbury's \textit{Letter}, which referenced the French Prophets several times, is

\textsuperscript{18} For his renunciation of Quakerism, see George Keith's \textit{Reasons for Renouncing Quakerism} (London: 1700). The remark about his benign reasons for being a Quaker is on page 4.
\textsuperscript{19} Humfrey, \textit{An Account}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Warning Concerning the French Prophets} (London, 1707).
\textsuperscript{21} Elie Marion, \textit{Avertissements Prophetiques} (London 1707).
\textsuperscript{23} Hutchinson, \textit{A Short View}, p. 55.
perhaps the only piece of literature that emerged from this controversy which has gained a lasting place in the English historical canon of toleration. It was written in 1708, by which point the furious controversy of 1707 had been well-established and had arguably diminished slightly from its height. Shaftesbury's call for, if not tolerance, than at least ignorance or simply ridicule of them, has seemingly stood out above the rush of furious pamphlets such as Kingston's, which roundly denounced the group as charlatans, spies, epileptics, and more, deeming them threats to English society.

But Shaftesbury should be seen in his context. Shaftesbury's sober, well-reasoned critique simply elaborated the same point that the cheap pamphlet, had been making less elegantly for some time. In effect, this group was participating in a discourse that was an attempt to narrow what was acceptable in mainstream religious faith; or, perhaps more accurately, to delineate what was religious and what was not.

Shaftesbury was firmly in that tradition: “Good Humour is not only the best security against Enthusiasm, but the best Foundation of Piety and true Religion: For if right Thoughts are worthy Apprehensions of the Supreme Being, are fundamental to all true Worship and Adoration; 'tis more than probable, that we shall never miscarry in this respect, but thro ill Humour only.”

Henry Nicholson, the former French Prophet, gave a similar explanation, though his reasoning was nearly circular. The Church of England was the true religion because it was motivated by the Spirit of God and the Holy Scriptures. The Spirit of God, and the Scriptures were the Spirit of Truth, and the Prophets were not motivated by the Spirit of Truth. Therefore the inspirés were frauds.

That Spirit of Truth was the basis for a rational, learned and moderate faith. Religion's true purpose was moral instruction, at least for those who were seeking to create consensus amongst various religious groups in the period. John Humfrey, for example, had spent decades writing pamphlets searching for a universal “Middle-Way” Christianity. Attacking his “neighbour” John Lacy, a favourite target for critics, Humfrey accused him of perverting the nature of the Holy Spirit: “God descended [for the Biblical prophets] as a Dove, but Lacy has him descend as a vulture.”

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24 Shaftesbury, p 35.
26 Humfrey, *An Account*, p. 5.
In fact, English society being what it was in Humfrey's eyes, it was essentially impossible for any kind of hysterical or enthusiastic prophecy to be real, though he did concede that in other cultures, it was possible. Humfrey wrote:

As for the many strange Things Reported to be done in the Cevennes, I have been apt to believe the most of them: Only for such as seemed to me incredible, I imagined the Narrations thereof as is usual, to be something more than the Things were. But it is to be considered, that the Protestants there are under Persecution, so as many Backsliding among them had need of Recovery, and all that staud [stayed] have need of Support by Preaching, and such Means as they have not, but by These Inspirations, wherewith many have been so animated, as to suffer Martyrdom for their Religion, to the exceeding Glory of God: But in our Kingdom, where the Higher Powers are Protestants, and we have all Toleration, it is a Question how these Men can act in Faith, or we believe it to be agreeable to the Wisdom of God, to send such Prophets and Inspirations among us where there is no such Fruit to be expected. 

That neat bit of reasoning simultaneously explained why, barring some sort of turn towards despotic persecution in England, no true Prophet could ever be a hysterical one. Religious enthusiasm became a kind of oxymoron, because enthusiasm was erroneous a priori because of the nature of English society. Likewise, Francis Hutchinson, who vied with Richard Kingston as to who would be the most openly outraged at the Prophets, expressed horror over the tone of the supposed prophecies of John Lacy, coming dangerously close to descending into farce: “In the 127th p. of his Second Part, speaking of something that we were to learn, he makes as if God should say, ---- I'll cram it down your Throats, and follow you with it into Hell, if you wouldn't know it sooner.” Hutchinson also appended a list of colloquialisms, slang and occasional gibberish words spoken by Lacy as further proof of his prophecies falling well short of God’s standard (God surely wouldn't use words like “Fiddle Faddle.”) Rather, wrote Hutchinson, “Our Blessed Saviour has grounded a Noble Rational and Divine Morality upon so strong a foundation as it is laid in our Holy Religion.”

The attacks on the Prophets during this period stayed away from doctrinal and eschatological issues, and instead almost every author drew a line, implicitly or explicitly, placing the French Prophets on one side of the line between true, rational religion, and irrational

27 Ibid., p. 13.
28 The words/phrases were: “Fiddle Faddle, Tom Fools Paradise, Humble Jumble, Blockhead, Poltroon, Scoundrel, Butcher, wretched Scoundrels, Vile All-be-naughts, Lindsey wolseystuff, no Quidlibets, Quodlibets gentlemen.” The image of Hutchinson going through the book to find nonsense words to be enraged by was welcome comic relief for this essay.
29 Hutchinson, p. 52.
superstition on the other. After the Act of Toleration in 1689, while the Anglican Church still retained a degree of legal primacy, its status as the only legitimate Church was gone. A more threatened Church was seeking to unite disparate elements towards a common, rational and somewhat empirical faith.

The Church was caught in an uneasy spot. From their perspective, outright denial of Providence was unthinkable, and yet so was the kind of the Providence whereby God could speak to any small group of ostensible crackpots and give divine legitimacy to their frequently egalitarian leanings. Their position was far from comfortable. Ultimately they maintained their belief in an active, providential God. But it was a God who, as Newton maintained, was active only so far as to maintain harmony and proper functioning of both the physical and moral aspects of the universe. This was the God of calm reason rather than violent cataclysm and radical change.

The French Prophets gave respectable critics the opportunity to define themselves through negation. The stories of the Prophets, as hysterical, dishonest and sexually depraved made it in their critics' interests to draw as much attention to them as possible, and to portray as a group of essentially dangerous, perhaps insane, men and women. The cases of both Henry Nicholson (who had briefly joined the ranks of the inspirés) and George Keith (the former Quaker) suggest that the lines between mainstream Anglicanism and fringe groups weren't nearly so well defined as the literature that emerged in the second half of the first decade of the 18th century suggested. The point had little to do with an obscure group of religious followers, and everything to do with being able to properly define what the nature of God's Providence was, and what that meant for the proper conduct of religion.

For the larger, mainstream denominations and most of the Anglican Church, religion was to be based on Natural Reason, the Spirit of Truth and Natural Law, all derived from Scripture. The alternative was the belief that accompanying Scripture should be divine revelation, whether it was the divine light of the Quakers, the spiritual connection of the Philadelphians, or the overt prophecy of the inspirés and their followers. Groups like the French Prophets helped critics create the category of “enthusiasm” and implicitly define themselves as reasonable.

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31 Jacob, pp. 100-111.
This essay has depicted mostly the initial reaction to the French Prophets, which came largely within the first year of their arrival or shortly after. At that point, as I've noted, despite the great stir and controversy (which was admitted to by both the supporters and opponents), to call them a “sect” was a wild exaggeration. After the sheer amount of publicity given towards this largely imaginary sect though, their numbers started to rise, suggesting that they may even have reached several hundred people from the period of mid to late 1708, continuing all the way until 1710. The initial flood of pamphlets, by trying to create a stark divide between rationality on the one hand and the Prophets on the other, may have actually pushed a small number of people (but still enough to greatly multiply their numbers) towards the Prophets. In other words, the most fervent critics of the French Prophets managed to do something that the inspirés had never been able to do: they’d created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

That growth was extremely short-lived however. We lose almost all trace of the Prophets after the early part of the 1710s. Hillel Schwartz, in his full-length study, openly wonders why the Prophets disappeared so quickly. He questions why, if over 100 French Prophets had children, it was that only the offspring of one (Hannah Wharton) that “appear as believers”? Yet we need not accept this as a mystery. The French Prophets disappeared after people stopped writing about the French Prophets. Schwartz notes that the group never had “formal membership requirements” or a “closeknit communal structure.” Before their critics started writing about them, the only group we might call “French Prophets” were somewhere between three and twenty-six people who had never claimed they were forming a sect, never called themselves French Prophets, and regularly attended other churches. Their existence as cohesive religious sect was almost entirely the projection of critics who had opportunistically exploited them as a way to further their own arguments. The Prophets became a kind of shorthand for everything their critics meant to attack.

The usefulness of the French Prophets as a symbol did not end in the 1710s. In 1742, an American preacher, Charles Chauncy, published the Wonderful Narrative of the Prophets, seemingly our first complete history of the group, and fittingly, he used the Prophets as an example to discredit enthusiastic preaching he faced in the midst of an enthusiastic revival in

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33 For a detailed numerical breakdown, see Schwartz’s appendices.
35 Schwartz, p. 279.
Massachusetts. “Who ever pretended to more intimate Converse with God, than the French Prophets?” he asked rhetorically. The Gospels, to Chauncy, were a “System every Way worthy of God, and approving itself to the Reason of man.” By discrediting the Prophets, he could hope to also damn “others of the Like Spirit.”

In England around the same time, Anglican preachers were once again condemning enthusiasm wholeheartedly. And so the French Prophets were revived again, a convenient historical example of the dangers of enthusiasm. Shaftesbury's letter was resuscitated in the 1740s and reprinted several times, and new authors took up the charge of discrediting enthusiasm, which was accomplished by associating it with the French Prophets. “The pretended Prophets about thirty Years ago, in their Effusions of blasphemous Nonsense, which they call'd Warnings, utter'd the most virulent invectives against the Clergy in general: Our present Enthusiasts, it is said, do the same; and none more, than those are Clergymen themselves,” wrote Joseph Trapp.

Theophilus Evans, in writing a history of enthusiasm from the Reformation onwards, devoted a chapter to the French Prophets, and ranked them highly on the scale of delusion. Once again, John Lacy was the person to whom was given the most attention. Lacy “perhaps, was the greatest Instance of Satanical Delusions that can be produced in any Age,” wrote Evans. If the link between the French Prophets and the Methodists wasn't clear enough to readers, Evans made sure they didn't miss the point. The French Prophets were “the Methodists of that Age.”

We might well ask ourselves what the trajectory of Marion, Fage, Cavalier and Lacy would have been had there not been such an outpouring of criticism. But with the temporary demise of the Philadelphians in 1703, and the unfortunate moderation of the Quakers, that wasn't to be the case. The writings of what otherwise would have been an obscure handful of millenarian Protestants meeting in a garden became a subject of major controversy and confrontation, and several decades later, once again became a foil for the reason-based Christianity of the Enlightenment.

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36 Charles Chauncy, The Wonderful Narrative, or, A Faithful Account of the French Prophets (Glasgow, 1742) preface ix.