

# NATURE'S SCOURGES: THE NATURAL WORLD AND SPECIAL PRAYERS, FASTS AND THANKSGIVINGS, 1541–1866\*

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FROM the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, special prayers, fasts and thanksgivings were an important means by which the Established Churches of England, Scotland and Ireland responded to natural occurrences. Although war prompted the largest number of special religious observances in this period, environmental calamities – instances of plague, famine, drought, earthquakes and storms – led civil and ecclesiastical authorities to order prayers, or to call national fast days, requiring subjects to cease work and attend worship on a specific day. Natural blessings, such as seasonable rain, successful harvests and the abatement of plague, were also marked by prayers, and sometimes by days of national thanksgiving. In Reformation England, the appointment of special observances can be traced back to 1541, when Henry VIII ordered Archbishop Cranmer to organize prayers in response to drought.<sup>1</sup> Henry's successors developed the practice of ordering special prayers and days in response to natural events and man-made calamities. In Scotland, national fasts were observed at the appointment of the church courts from 1566;<sup>2</sup> they were not regularly under the control of the Crown until the Restoration period. The first national thanksgiving in Scotland was appointed in 1600 after James VI survived an apparent attempt on his life by the Earl of Gowrie.<sup>3</sup> In Ireland, the first special observance was

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<sup>1</sup> London, LPL, MS. Cranmer Register, I, fol. 18<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> W. Ian P. Hazlett, 'Playing God's Card: Knox and Fasting, 1565–66', in Roger A. Mason, ed., *John Knox and the British Reformations* (Aldershot, 1998), 176–98.

<sup>3</sup> *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, 1st ser., ed. J. H. Burton and D. Masson, 14 vols (Edinburgh, 1877–98), 6: 156–57.

a fast day called in 1625. From 1651, the Irish authorities quite regularly appointed special prayers in response to natural events.<sup>4</sup>

Most previous historians of these religious observances have concentrated on short series of prayers or days, usually illustrating a particular political context.<sup>5</sup> This paper surveys the full history of those special prayers, fasts and thanksgivings called in response to disease, meteorological events, fire, earthquakes and successful or failed harvests. It is based on the little-studied proclamations and acts appointing special days, and the prayers issued to be read in English, Welsh and Irish Churches.<sup>6</sup> These provide new evidence of the continuity into the modern period of ideas concerning God's providential government of the natural world. Some historians, notably Keith Thomas, Alexandra Walsham and William Burns, have argued that in the late seventeenth century Providence was marginalized as a means of explaining natural events.<sup>7</sup> This interpretation should be qualified. While the use of providential language to report individuals' experiences – what Nicholas Guyatt has called 'personal providentialism' – was in decline, civil officials and clergymen continued to explain events of national and global significance in terms of Providence. Special prayers used the rhetoric of 'national providentialism'<sup>8</sup> to describe natural processes, with surprisingly little change through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Frank Turner was incorrect to assert that 'the Anglican church of the eighteenth century issued no special prayers during national disasters'.<sup>9</sup> And Richard Janet's claim that English

<sup>4</sup> Robert Steele, *A Bibliography of Royal Proclamations of the Tudor and Stuart Sovereigns, 1485–1714*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1910), 2: nos 266, 481, 485, 554.

<sup>5</sup> The most recent investigation of this subject, which discusses much of the previous literature, is Philip Williamson, 'State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings: Public Worship in Britain 1830–1897', *P&P*, no. 200 (August 2008), 169–222.

<sup>6</sup> In Scotland, a form of prayer written for the fast of 1566 was used until the 1630s, after which the Established Church eschewed set forms.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (Harmondsworth, 1973), 126–28; Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 333–34; William E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England, 1657–1727* (Manchester, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876* (Cambridge, 2007), 5–6, 14–17, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Frank M. Turner, 'Rainfall, Plagues, and the Prince of Wales: A Chapter in the Conflict of Religion and Science', *JBS* 13 (1974), 46–65, at 49.

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fast days between 1721 and 1832 were called only for military purposes is misleading:<sup>10</sup> the fast of 1756 responded to the Lisbon earthquake as well as to war, and a fast in 1801 was prompted in part by shortages of food. Natural events also inspired Scottish fasts, and thanksgiving days in all parts of the British Isles, during this period. None of the special prayers and days between 1759 and 1796 was provoked by natural events, but in some degree this reflects the greater significance of war in public life in these years.

It is increasingly clear that ideas of Providence remained widespread in the eighteenth century. Most people believed in God's superintendence of the natural world and saw his hand in particular events, though opinions varied as to whether divine interventions temporarily suspended the natural order.<sup>11</sup> The evangelical climate of the first half of the nineteenth century made Providence more prominent in public life,<sup>12</sup> but it was not necessary for Evangelicals to rediscover a defunct concept. Moreover, the orders and prayers for special observances illustrate how divine and natural explanations could coexist.<sup>13</sup> They show how religious occasions could be used to convey news, instructions and justifications of government policies from the political centres to worshippers in the parishes.

In the period from from the first observance in 1541 to the last in 1866, natural events prompted the appointment of at least 103 fasts, thanksgivings and special prayers.<sup>14</sup> This total includes

<sup>10</sup> Richard J. Janet, 'Providence, Prayer and Cholera: The English General Fast of 1832', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51 (1982), 297–317, at 308.

<sup>11</sup> J. C. D. Clark, 'Providence, Predestination and Progress: Or, Did the Enlightenment Fail?', *Albion* 35 (2003), 559–89; Robert J. Ingram, "'The Trembling earth is God's Herald": Earthquakes, Religion and Public Life in Britain during the 1750s', in Theodore E. D. Braun and John B. Radner, eds, *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions* (Oxford, 2005), 97–115; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford, 1986), 13–14.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd Hilton, 'The Role of Providence in Evangelical Social Thought', in *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick*, ed. Derek Beales and Geoffrey Best (Cambridge, 1985), 215–33.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Françoise Deconinck-Brossard, 'Acts of God, Acts of Men: Providence in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century England and France', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds, *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church*, SCH 41 (Woodbridge, 2005), 356–75, at 357.

<sup>14</sup> The main sources used to compile this list were William Keatinge Clay, ed., *Liturgical Services: Liturgies and Occasional Forms of Prayer set forth in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth*, PS (Cambridge, 1847); David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. Thomas Thomson and David Laing, 8 vols, Wodrow Society (1842–49); *Acts of the*

40 prayers and days observed throughout England and Wales, 27 exclusively Scottish occasions, 5 Irish, and 25 eighteenth- and nineteenth-century occasions that were observed in at least three of the four nations. A further 2 prayers (in 1543 and 1560) seem to have been used in Canterbury province alone, and 4 observances were restricted to capital cities. In addition to these 103 observances, other fast and thanksgiving days appointed in response to man-made events sometimes inspired clergy to refer to natural phenomena.<sup>15</sup> The Book of Common Prayer contained prayers relating to the weather, harvest and disease, used at ministers' discretion in England and Wales throughout the period.

Human and animal diseases prompted fifty-one of the occasions. The major English plague outbreaks between 1563 and 1665 occasioned national fasts or the issuing of forms of penitent prayer. Indeed, the order and prayers issued for the fast of 1563, the first such national day in England, were the basis for forms of prayer appointed in response to the plague in 1593, 1603, 1625 and 1636. And in 1563–64, 1604, 1625, 1658 and 1666, the waning of epidemics prompted the Crown to call for prayers or days of thanksgiving. In 1720 and 1721, special prayers and fasting were part of the government's attempt to prevent an outbreak of plague, which was then affecting Continental Europe. Prayers continued to be issued in response to epidemic disease: after 1830, outbreaks of cholera helped to bring about an increase in the overall frequency of special prayers and days.<sup>16</sup> Cattle disease also prompted prayers. A collect for the relief of cattle mortality was added to the Anglican service in 1748 and used daily for eleven years. In 1865–66, an outbreak of bovine disease, combined with a cholera epidemic, inspired three special prayers.

Weather conditions, the threat of dearth and the success or failure of harvests were marked by forty-nine of the special prayers and days. Indeed, the first two special prayers (in 1541 and 1543) responded to unseasonable weather. Weather – in most cases heavy rain – also prompted observances in England and Wales in 1560,

*General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, MDCXXXVIII–MDCCCXLII* (Edinburgh, 1843); Steele, *Bibliography of Royal Proclamations*; ESTC, <<http://estc.bl.uk>>; the LPL catalogue; and the *London Gazette*.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., *The Causes of this General Fast, to begin the first Sabbath of August next, 1595* (Edinburgh, 1595).

<sup>16</sup> Williamson, 'State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings', 172–73.

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1613, 1646, 1648 and 1661–62. The stormy winter of 1703–04 led to fast days in the three kingdoms. Dearth inspired prayers throughout the period, but the most important famine, judged from the five fasts it prompted, afflicted Scotland in the late 1690s. After the improved harvest of 1699, a national thanksgiving was called, but continuing dearth was mentioned in the acts appointing fasts in 1700 and 1701. Ireland's potato famine led the government in England to appoint a prayer in September 1846 and a general fast in the following March.

Earthquakes prompted observances in 1580, 1750 and 1756. Yet of all the devastating fires in the period, it is interesting that only the great fire of London (1666) and fires in Edinburgh in 1700 and 1701 were marked on a national basis. This casts doubt on whether all the most severe disasters and greatest blessings inspired special observances. Moreover, there was a tendency for prayers and days to be called in cycles. This is particularly apparent with respect to thanksgivings for abundant harvests, which were often appointed immediately after times of scarcity, as in 1699, 1796, 1801 and 1847. One of the prayers issued in 1847 made the relationship clear, being addressed to 'Merciful God, at whose bidding the earth hath withholden her increase, and again hath rendered her fruits in their season'. The lesson – 'our entire dependence on Thee [God] for the supply of our daily bread' – was no doubt easier to apprehend in the context of greatly fluctuating agricultural yields.<sup>17</sup>

Fasts, thanksgivings and the other special prayers examined here were meant as acknowledgements of divine Providence, its scourges and blessings, and also as pleas for God's mercy and favour. The form of prayer for the English fast of 1563 contained a preface justifying the practice of fasting which was adapted and republished several times over the following century. As this preface made clear, God manifested his anger against sin by sending 'particuler punyshementes, afflictions, and perylles'. These called the people to repent of their sins, reform their lives and crave a respite from their danger. The example of the successful prayers of King David 'in the time of plague and pestilence which ensued upon

<sup>17</sup> *A Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving to Almighty God; to be used in all Churches and Chapels in England and Wales ... on Sunday the Seventeenth Day of October 1847* (London, 1847), 5.

his vayne numbrying of the people' (2 Samuel 24) was invoked.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the period, orders and prayers alluded to Old Testament stories of providential scourges. A form of prayer for the fast called in response to heavy rain in 1661 specified that the account of Noah in Genesis 8 be read.<sup>19</sup> After the Lisbon earthquake of 1756, English and Welsh congregations were to be put in mind of God's violent punishment of the world as described in Isaiah 24.<sup>20</sup> The form of prayer for the equivalent fast day in Ireland specified as a lesson Ezekiel 14, with its account of judgements inflicted on Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> Yet fast day services also aimed to instil the hope that God would treat England, Scotland and Ireland with the mercy seen in his dealings with Israel. Thus a prayer for the fast held after the cholera outbreak of 1832 recalled the relief brought by King David's worship, and told how the 'repentance of Nineveh didst spare that sinful city'.<sup>22</sup> Although the forms of prayer also specified readings from the New Testament, it was Old Testament texts – permitting typological comparisons between Israel and England, Scotland, Ireland or Britain – that did most to describe the roles of Providence and the natural world.

The practice of fasting and praying in response to natural events exemplifies what Keith Thomas has called the 'self-confirming quality' of the doctrine of Providence.<sup>23</sup> Some observances were quickly followed by relief from danger or disease. In July 1658, Oliver Cromwell appointed a thanksgiving to celebrate the defeat of an invasion attempt and the end of an outbreak of plague. In his declaration, Cromwell saw the decline in deaths as a response to earlier prayers: 'tis not without remark, that the two weeks Bills of Mortality, immediately after the Fast upon that occasion

<sup>18</sup> *A Fourme to be used in Common Prayer Twyse Aweke, and also an Order of Publique Fast, to be used every Wednesday in the Weeke, during this Time of Mortality* (London, 1563), sig. Aii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> *A Form of Prayer, to be used upon the Twelfth of June* (London, 1661), sig. [B4]<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> *A Form of Prayer, to be used ... upon Friday the Sixth Day of February next* (London, 1756), 7.

<sup>21</sup> *A Form of Prayer, to be used in all Churches and Chappels throughout the Kingdom of Ireland, upon Friday the Sixth Day of February next* (Dublin, 1756), 7.

<sup>22</sup> *A Form of Prayer, to be used in all Churches and Chapels throughout those Parts of the United Kingdom called England and Ireland, on Wednesday the Twenty-first Day of March 1832* (Berwick-upon-Tweed, 1832), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 95, 137.

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[of the plague], were brought to the half of what they were the week before, and did amount not to more discernably then in the healthiest times'.<sup>24</sup> On some occasions, however, national humiliation was seen to have little effect. When successive fasts failed to remove the famine afflicting Scotland in the late 1690s, this was attributed to insufficiently sincere fasting and repentance. As the commission of the General Assembly lamented in December 1696, 'few have been duely humbled' for the nation's sins, and 'few have joyned suitable Reformation with their professed Humiliation'. God's anger continued to be 'visible in the Judgment of frequent Sickness, and great Mortality, Dearth inflicted, and Famine threatned'.<sup>25</sup> In subsequent years, the Church of Scotland's fast acts repeatedly complained that sins had been 'not yet sufficiently mourned for', or that divine mercies had been forgotten.<sup>26</sup> In 1757, an English preacher published his sermons on the previous fast days, so 'that the Fast, though gone, may not be forgotten. That We may remember the Sins We confessed, and the Miseries We deprecated'.<sup>27</sup> An ungrateful people continually had to be urged to repent, pray and appease God's anger.

With respect to the plague, however, providential beliefs could conflict with the desire of the civil authorities to restrict contagion. Some forms of prayer for English plague-time observances, together with the government's plague orders, sought to prevent clergy from teaching that no practical measures could counter the disease, or that only the sinful would be infected.<sup>28</sup> It was also necessary to ensure that, by assembling congregations for worship, special observances did not contribute to the spread of the disease. The order for the fast of 1563 requested that 'prudent' measures be taken to segregate infected people from the healthy.<sup>29</sup> In 1625,

<sup>24</sup> *A Declaration of His Highnesse the Lord Protector for a Day of Publick Thanksgiving* (London, 1658), 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Causes of a Solemn National Fast and Humiliation, unanimously agreed upon by the Commission appointed by the late General Assembly* (Edinburgh, 1696).

<sup>26</sup> *Acts of the General Assembly*, 290, 435 (1700 and 1709 respectively).

<sup>27</sup> James Hervey, *The Time of Danger, and the Means of Safety; to which is added, the Way of Holiness. Being the Substance of Three Sermons, Preached on the Late Public Fast-Days* (London, 1757), iii.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1985), 230–31; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 101–02.

<sup>29</sup> *Fourme to be used in Common Prayer*, sig. Aii<sup>v</sup>.

clergy were instructed not to keep the people in church too long, both to prevent misunderstanding of the religious merit of fasting, and also to reduce the chance of contagion.<sup>30</sup> In 1636, the fast was to be 'no otherwise Celebrated in publike ... then by a Devout and Religious use of the Prayers in the Printed Booke'.<sup>31</sup> These restrictions on preaching can certainly be set in the context of the Caroline church's struggles with its puritan critics.<sup>32</sup> Yet there was also a public health rationale for limiting the length of congregational worship in infected areas.

Thus orders and prayers conveyed the civil government's instructions for responding to the plague, at the same time as they propagated providential narratives implying that God was the chief source of respite. One collect for use in the fast of 1563 suggested that sufferers should abandon 'all confidence in our selues or any other creature', and depend on the mediation of Christ.<sup>33</sup> This prayer was reprinted in the form for the fast of 1603. Yet the homily provided in 1603 taught that 'though it be true that all things are guided by God's prouidence', yet 'hath he ordained the Phisition and created many medicinable and comfortable things to procure and preserue the health of man'.<sup>34</sup> In 1832, the prayers for the fast day called in response to cholera also sought to balance divine intervention and human effort, calling for God's assistance 'that we may neither neglect the means of preservation, nor look for success in the use of them, without Thy blessing'.<sup>35</sup>

Special prayers and days often mixed providential and political messages; these were not necessarily in conflict. In Scotland, for example, fast days called in response to the threat of plague were occasionally used to provide explanations and justifications of government policies. In 1665, a fast proclamation explained that plague in England had led the government to forbid trade with

<sup>30</sup> *A Forme of Common Prayer, together with an Order of Fasting* (London, 1625), sig. [O3]<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> James Larkin, ed., *Stuart Royal Proclamations. 2: Royal Proclamations of King Charles I, 1625–1646* (Oxford, 1983), 539.

<sup>32</sup> Walsham, *Providence*, 164–65.

<sup>33</sup> *Fourme to be used in Common Prayer*, sig. Biii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> *Certaine Prayers collected out of a Forme of Godly Meditations* (London, 1603), sig. [C4]<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> *Form of Prayer ... on Wednesday the Twenty-first Day of March 1832*, 5.



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the southern kingdom, so as to prevent the spread of disease.<sup>36</sup> Even the Presbyterians, who played a role in the appointment of special days after the re-establishment of their church polity in 1690, helped to account for government policy. In November 1711, the commission of the General Assembly called for a fast in response to the threat of plague, then raging on the Continent, 'For preventing wherof, Her Majesty hath Exercised such a wise and tender care'.<sup>37</sup>

The religious significance and social functions of fast days intersected in another way when parishioners were instructed to make charitable donations for the relief of the poor, the starving or those afflicted by disease. The order of 1563 specified that the wealthy should reduce their ordinary expenditure and increase their almsgiving.<sup>38</sup> In 1625, they were explicitly encouraged 'to bestow the price of the meale forborne, vpon the poore'.<sup>39</sup> In 1666, the English government used a national fast day as a means to collect donations for those left destitute and homeless by the great fire of London.<sup>40</sup> Most of the funds raised to relieve victims of the Irish potato famine were collected on the fast day held in March 1847.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, prayers issued after successful harvests sometimes encouraged churchgoers to enjoy the plenty with an eye to social responsibility. In 1796, English worshippers asked for grace 'to employ the gifts of Thy bounty to Thy glory; neither squandering them in riot and luxury, nor hoarding them for greediness of sordid gain'.<sup>42</sup>

More generally, the orders and prayers issued for special religious observances helped to convey news of natural events. The

<sup>36</sup> *A Proclamation, for a Publick General Fast throughout the Kingdom of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1665).

<sup>37</sup> Edinburgh, NAS, Commission of the General Assembly registers, CH1/3/11, fol. 282.

<sup>38</sup> *Fourme to be used in Common Prayer*, sig. Ciii<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> *Forme of Common Prayer, together with an Order of Fasting*, sig. O2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>40</sup> *By the King. A Proclamation for a General Fast through England and Wales, and the Town of Barwick [sic] upon Tweed, on Wednesday the Tenth of October next* (London, 1666).

<sup>41</sup> Peter Gray, "'Potatoes and Providence': British Government Responses to the Great Famine", *Bullán* 1 (1994), 75–90, at 84.

<sup>42</sup> *A Prayer of Thanksgiving to Almighty God; for the great Blessing, which, in His Mercy and Goodness, he hath Vouchsafed to this Nation, in our Favourable and Abundant Harvest* (London, 1796), 4.

form of prayer produced in response to the earthquake of 1580 provided an account of the disaster, suitable for reading from the pulpit.<sup>43</sup> Following the great fire of London, the royal proclamation appointing a fast gave a brief but authoritative description of the devastation, a 'Visitation so dreadful, that scarce any Age or Nation hath ever seen or felt the like'.<sup>44</sup> Proclamations and prayers also helped to explain the consequences of natural occurrences. In 1661, the royal proclamation for a fast in England and Wales cautioned that recent heavy rain might lead to 'scarcity, and famine, and sickness, and diseases'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, on occasion special prayers emphasized secular losses and gains more than providential explanations. This was more common with prayers inspired by military victories than those responding to the natural world. Yet in 1754 a clerical correspondent of the *London Evening Post* complained that the prayer for the relief of disease in cattle had 'nothing of the Spirit of the Gospel in it', and was an invitation to the congregation 'to be carnally minded'.<sup>46</sup>

Special prayers, fasts and thanksgivings reflected nature's scourges and its benefits. They demonstrate that political and ecclesiastical authorities promoted providential interpretations of natural processes throughout the three centuries after the Reformation. Yet from the start, special prayers and days regularly combined providential language with more secular or political messages. By studying the orders and prayers on which this paper is based, historians will learn more about how public worship could respond to environmental and political conditions. This paper has investigated beliefs and practices prescribed by the Established Churches of England, Scotland and Ireland, and has not tested the responses of parishioners to fasts and thanksgivings. Nor has there been space to consider why special prayers and days, which continued until the mid-twentieth century, were not called in response to epidemic disease and other natural events after 1866.<sup>47</sup> These reli-

<sup>43</sup> Clay, ed., *Liturgical Services*, 567. See also Natalie Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms* (Cambridge, 2005), 163–66.

<sup>44</sup> *Proclamation for a Fast on the Tenth of October*.

<sup>45</sup> *By the King, A Proclamation, for a General Fast throughout the Realm of England* (London, 1661).

<sup>46</sup> *London Evening Post*, no. 4126, 20–23 April 1754.

<sup>47</sup> Individual bishops in the Church of England responded to natural events by appointing prayers in their dioceses after this date: see, e.g., *The Times*, 29 June 1882, 8e.

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gious observances raise a number of questions for future research, which will cast further light on Protestant attitudes to the natural world.

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