

Paper 1: A Level sample answer with comments

Section A

To what extent were religious differences responsible for the failure to reach a political settlement between 1629 and 1653?

Strong student answer

The years 1629 to 1653 were crucial in shaping the constitutional future of Britain, as they include the 'eleven years tyranny' of Charles I, the First Civil War, resulting in the capture of the king and ultimately his execution when a settlement could not be reached. 1649–53 is also important because it marks the country's first attempt at Republican rule under the Commonwealth and Nominated Assembly. This however also failed to provide a lasting settlement and the country would soon be ruled by Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector, bringing government back to an arbitrary and autocratic system. Religion lay at the heart of national life during the 17th century, and was responsible for many decisions not only in people's everyday lives but also in politics. This is why differences over religious matters are a crucial area of study when assessing these years. As well as religion, the 17th century was the age of personal monarchy, so the role and decisions made by Charles I are essential in understanding the search for a settlement. After the Civil War, the Army became an important part of political life, and this added a further complication to negotiations.

Religious differences lay at the heart of the search for a settlement between 1629 and 1653. From the outset it was clear that Charles had inherited his father's belief in divine right, and this was evident in many of his dealings with parliament. When he decided to rule without parliament between 1629 and 1640, religious differences that already existed were exacerbated. Whig historians have called these years the 'eleven years tyranny', partly because of Archbishop Laud's persecution of Puritans. The infamous case of Bastwick, Burton and Prynne, who were imprisoned for life and mutilated, highlights the religious tensions evident in the 1630s. When the time came for a political settlement to be reached in order for Charles to fund a war with the Scots, the puritan-dominated House of Commons made it difficult for Charles to get what he wanted. The leader of the opposition, John Pym, pushed for restrictions on religious courts and bishops. Indeed, when the gentry took sides at the outbreak of war in 1642, the issue of whether a hierarchical church with bishops should still exist lay behind the decisions of many. In Scotland and Ireland, too, religious differences meant that settlements could not be reached. The Presbyterian Scots were outraged when Charles attempted to impose the Anglican prayer book on them in 1637, resulting in the formation of the National Covenant in 1638, and the Irish Rebellion of 1641 was partly due to the native Catholic population feeling they had been betrayed by their Protestant overlords.

Religious radicalism became a real force during the First Civil War, when the Leveller movement influenced many rank and file soldiers in the New Model Army. The Levellers demanded religious toleration, as well as equality before the law. The Levellers had an important impact on the search for a settlement between 1646 and 1648, and ultimately the execution of Charles I in 1649. Cromwell envisaged a godly government running the country after the death of Charles, but again religious differences meant this was not possible. Although Cromwell was an Independent, and compulsory attendance at church was repealed through the Toleration Act of 1650, he crushed the Levellers, as well as other radical groups such as the Ranters and Diggers. Cromwell ultimately favoured a settlement that favoured the gentry and did not threaten the existing social hierarchy. The Nominated Assembly, or 'Barebones Parliament', was supposed to be a 'Parliament of Saints', but this collapsed within a few months due to the conservative nature of many of the members.

This is a strong introduction that sets out the demands of the question well. Some context to the question is provided and it explains why each of the chosen factors are important.

A detailed section that provides a convincing argument. The issue of religious differences is focused on throughout, with strong supporting evidence.

The actions of Charles cannot be ignored when assessing the failure to reach a political settlement in these years. In the age of personal monarchy, the king's personality and decisions inevitably had an enormous impact on politics. Charles alienated many of the political nation during his personal rule and their frustration would be clear when parliament met again in 1640. Prerogative taxes such as forest fines, distraint of knighthood and ship money, which raised up to £200,000 a year, caused resentment. In 1637, the Buckinghamshire gentleman John Hampden refused to pay ship money and was taken to court. He narrowly lost his case, but by 1639 there was effectively a strike of the taxpayers. Charles had also caused resentment as a result of his Scottish policy and when he recalled parliament he was attempting to finance an expensive war north of the border. Charles was the key figure in the lack of a settlement between 1640 and 1642, as well as during the Civil War itself. When offers of a settlement were put to Charles, such as the Grand Remonstrance and Nineteen Propositions, he maintained that the role of parliament was not to govern jointly but to simply approve taxation. Charles also contributed to the lack of a settlement because he was undoubtedly to blame for starting the Second Civil War in 1648, by entering into secret negotiations with the Scots. However, the opposition can also be blamed for the lack of a settlement. The demands made to Charles were often unrealistic. For example, the Grand Remonstrance in 1641 asked to control the king's councillors and the Four Bills put to Charles in 1647 demanded that parliament control the army for 20 years, something they knew he was unlikely to agree to.

From the creation of the New Model Army onwards, the role of the military in political affairs is crucial in explaining the lack of a settlement. The Army became heavily politicised in 1647. Their original demands amounted to asking for arrears of £3,000,000 to be paid and they soon elected Agitators to advance their political cause. They came to blows with the Presbyterians in parliament who favoured a moderate settlement with the king. At the Putney Debates in October 1647, the rank and file soldiers were represented by Thomas Rainsborough, the highest-ranking Leveller in the Army. He debated with Henry Ireton, who spoke for conservatism and maintaining the existing hierarchy. After the Second Civil War, radical Army officers led by Thomas Pride purged parliament of Royalist sympathisers. After the execution, Leveller mutinies were suppressed by Cromwell and Fairfax, and the Army would be crucial in upholding the experimental Commonwealth and Nominated Assembly. It can be argued that the Commonwealth and Nominated Assembly lacked legitimacy because they were effectively the results of military coups. Royalist feeling was still strong between 1649 and 1653, and if the Army was not so powerful, the monarchy may have been restored earlier than 1660.

The one party that attempted to prevent a settlement at every stage was undeniably Charles. His commitment to divine right and a genuine belief that he was the only true authority in the country stemmed from his religious beliefs, so both factors worked together to prevent a settlement being reached. The clash of high church Anglicanism and Puritanism that had been building up since the Reformation came to a head in the 1630s and 1640s, so it is clear that Charles would not have been so integral to the events that took place if it was not for religious differences.

The role of Charles is evaluated well by offering a counter-argument suggesting the opposition within parliament were equally to blame. This counter-argument could be expanded further.

Although not as detailed as the previous paragraphs, relevant factual material is deployed to provide a strong argument.

The conclusion comes to a substantiated judgement and states that Charles is most responsible for the lack of a settlement. The conclusion also shows an appreciation for other factors and how they are linked.

Verdict

This is a strong response because:

- it sets out the demands of the question in the introduction and explores a number of key issues, with sustained analysis throughout
- strong supporting evidence is used throughout to respond to the demands of the question
- reasoned judgements are made about the importance of each factor before coming to a strong conclusion
- it is well organised, and the argument is coherent and logical.