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# Reason and Religion in the English Revolution: The Challenge of Socinianism

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Perhaps because it was concerned with maintaining obedience and the status quo rather than provoking violent eruptions of religious fervour, Socianism has remained a relatively unstudied aspect of the pantheon of heterodox religious beliefs during the English Revolution. Aside from McLachlan?s *Socinianism in Seventeenth Century England* (1951), studies of the group have typically remained confined to the continent, leaving us with little understanding of its role in 17th-century English thought. Equally, those studies that do exist have typically emerged from a Unitarian tradition which often overemphasised the connection between Socinian and modern Unitarian beliefs. Accordingly, Mortimer?s study offers crucial insight into this previously ill-understood aspect of English history, shedding light on their influence during the mid 17th century.

Based upon the theology of Italian Faustus Socinus, whose ideas took root in Polish town of Rakow during the early 17th century, Socinianism posed a seditious challenge to both the Protestant and Catholic churches. At the core of Socinus? thought was the belief that in order to have any meaning, religion must be based on free choice and genuine conviction, rather than resulting from a natural state of being or innate knowledge of God. Such an attitude controversially severed any connection between nature and religion. In an equally contentious move, early Socinian writings also discounted the doctrine of grace, interpreting Christ?s life as

an example of how to obtain salvation. Thus, his death and resurrection demonstrated God?s reward for a virtuous life, rather than acting as a literal sacrifice for the sins of humanity. By implication, the doctrine of the Trinity was challenged. Like much of his thought, Socinus? view of the Trinity was influenced by his legal background. Inspired by aspects of Roman law, he believed that God was by necessity a personal agent, rather than essence or force, acting within a legal system and bestowed with power and authority that was transferable. Therefore, rather than forming an inherent aspect of the Godhead, Christ was a historical figure to whom God?s power was delegated. From this basis, man?s relationship with God was framed in terms of legal rights, rather than natural imperative or law, coupling freedom of action with responsibility. Thus, Socinianism was a moralistic and ethical religion, in which individual Christian virtue was key.

It is important to note that there were few, if any, individuals in seventeenth-century England who can be identified as definitively ?Socinian?. Nonetheless, Mortimer makes an excellent case for the prevalence of Socinian ideas, both in terms of positive and negative engagement, throughout the English Revolution. It is their influence that she traces, arguing that they played a central role in a number of key debates in an attempt to integrate these ideas ?into the broader political and religious landscape of the period? (p. 1). Such a project necessarily rests at the intersection between politics and religion, and has potentially important implications for our understanding of these central themes in 17th-century England.

In chapter one, Mortimer offers a clear and concise outline of Socinian theology, as well as a convincing account of the group?s early reception in Europe and the developments made by its second generation of thinkers. Opening with concepts of justice and virtue in Socinus? writing, she tackles his radical reconfiguration of the figure of Christ and his rejection of natural religiosity in favour of scripturally-based revelation assessed by individual reason. Finally, Mortimer explains how Socinus? emphasis on the role of virtue in salvation saw him perceive sin as a debt, giving God both the right of punishment over humanity and also the discretion of forgiveness. Indeed, Mortimer returns to this legalistic strain of Socinianism throughout the book, providing an interesting comparison to previous scholarship on the group.

As the chapter continues, we are introduced to early Protestant opposition to Socinianism, provoked by its challenges to core aspects of Reformed belief. On the other hand, however, there were those who adopted Socinus? doctrines as it spread across Europe, particularly to Germany and the United Provinces. Indeed, Socinianism would soon come into contact with Arminianism and the Remonstrants. Mortimer identifies a second generation of Socinianism, who developed on the ideas of their forebears in this context of theological interaction. Johan Crell, in particular, was responsible for developing upon Socinus? understanding of God?s relationship with man in terms of rights, notably completing *De Vera Religione* (1630), previously left unfinished by the deceased Jan Volkelius. Also of importance was Hugo Grotius, a Dutch jurist and Remonstrant who, despite opposing certain aspects of Socinus? thought, was soon drawn into good-natured discussion with Crell. This lead to a relationship of mutual respect and influence with the second generation of Socinians, helping them develop a view of man?s relationship with God that allowed for a greater emphasis on the role of human society and community while still retaining an emphasis on voluntary faith. Importantly, both Grotius and Crell remain central to Mortimer?s narrative, and it is perhaps telling that the former cannot be precisely defined as Socinian.

Despite its influence on the continent, Socinianism failed to have much of an impact in England before about 1630. Chapter two charts how high hopes for successes in England were scuppered by a cold reception in 1609 and the subsequent disinterest in the 1610s and 1620s. Mortimer confidently explains this turn of events by emphasising the idiosyncrasies of political and religious conflict in England at this time. Following Nicholas Tyacke?s lead, she focusses on the distinctions between Dutch Arminianism and English ?anti-Calvinism?, particularly the latter?s lack of concern with individual faith and morality and its emphasis on church unity. Equally, she notes, English Calvinism had less of the rigour prominent in its Dutch counterpart, and thus drove fewer theologians to alternative modes of Christianity. It was not until the early 1630s that Socinianism became a concern in English circles. Even then, it was initially only singled out a polemical target by men such as John Dury who were engaged in a mission to reconcile the Protestant churches.

It is not until chapter three that our attentions are turned to positive engagements with Socinian thought by those involved in increasing opposition to Calvinism in the 1630s, detailing its attraction to those who sought an ethical alternative to rigorous predestination. Arguing that the influence of Socinianism was particularly prevalent outside the academic and clerical worlds, Mortimer focuses on certain members of the Tew Circle. Here she offers a interesting explanation for the apparent discrepancy between the Circle?s reputation for tolerant, liberal thinking and their emphasis on sovereignty, explaining it through a reconfiguration of the relationship between God and man offered by Socinian ideas. Of particular note was William Chillingworth who, alongside the Second Viscount Falkland, made use of Socinian writings when criticising the role of the church in scriptural interpretation. Ultimately, this lead them to a conviction in the role of individual agency and reason in religion that owed much to Socinianism, inherently criticising both Catholic monopolization of scriptural understanding and Puritan notions of election. Furthermore, Chillingworth took a legalistic view of Christianity, making use of distinctly Socinian language.

However, one might question the extent to which Chillingworth was representative of the Tew Circle. Indeed, the objections raised by some of the group at Chillingworth?s flirtation with Socinianism place a strain on the chapter?s conclusions. While the diversity of thought in the Tew Circle is acknowledged, Mortimer does little to explain how her attempts to use Socinianism to reconcile the Circle?s liberalism with their belief in sovereignty stands up to the recognition that few of its members were sympathetic to the sect?s views. Nonetheless, this chapter certainly succeeds in demonstrating how elements of Socinianism could be adopted in England at this time, and the repercussions this could have.

Chapter four discusses Royalist interest in Socinian ideas, especially during the Civil Wars. Neatly sidestepping the issue of the Trinity, these men made particular use of Socinian arguments against resistance in order to support the King. Mortimer demonstrates how these ideas, many novel in an English context, owed more to Socinianism than previously appreciated. In particular, it is noted that certain members and affiliates of the Tew Circle, including Chillingworth and Dudley Digges, were able to use their familiarity with Socinianism to combat Parliamentarian resistance theories grounded in natural law. Specifically, they disputed the responsibility of self-preservation cited by Parliamentarians as justification for opposing the King, recasting it as a right of self-defence that was forfeit when entering civil society.

However, Mortimer?s argument for the relevance of Socinianism is tempered somewhat by the recognition that this phenomenon was confined to a relative minority of Royalists. Others, like John Maxwell, were sufficiently unnerved to speak out against them. Equally, one is left to wonder to what extent these men really engaged with Socinian ideas on as a theological doctrine, as they are often portrayed as adopting them for political expediency rather than experiencing internalised religious conviction. Some interrogation of this issue would surely have proved illuminating. Nonetheless, Mortimer has met with considerable success in shedding light on this important, if not dominant, fixture in Royalist political rhetoric.

The influence of Socinianism was not limited to anti-resistance theories, however, and in chapter five Mortimer discusses its use in defending the Church of England, with a particular emphasis on Henry Hammond. Challenging traditional perceptions of Hammond as Arminian, Mortimer sets out to highlight tell-tale signs of Socinian influence in his writing, particularly in his concerns with moral theology and as a mode of defence for his ecclesiology, making note of his use of Grotius? ideas. One of the most useful aspects of this chapter is the analysis of the the differences between Arminian and Socinian theology, as well as their synthesis at the hands of the Remonstrants, usefully placing Socinus? ideas in a familiar intellectual context. Indeed, the real success here is not so much in relabelling Hammond as Socinianism rather than Arminian, but in demonstrating how Calvinism?s English opponents drew from a range of continental sources, adding further nuance to our understanding of this doctrinal conflict.

At this point, Mortimer?s focus shifts from Royalist engagements with Socinianism to its role in Parliamentarian thought following the Civil Wars. Following the upheaval of the 1640, debates over church settlement highlighted divisions over what constituted the ?fundamental principles? of Christianity (p. 147). In particular, Mortimer identifies the challenge Socinianism posed to those attempting to establish a

trinitarian church based on scripture parsed by human reason that fell under the authority of the civil magistrate. Indeed, it is in the debates over the Trinity in the 1640s and 1650s that she identifies the impact of Socinianism.

Chapter six sets out to outline the increase in scholarly objections to the Trinity in the 1640s and 1650s. This begins with an insightful account of the contemporary European context, offering an explanation of Socinian and Remonstrant antitrinitarian arguments. Of particular note is Crell?s objection to the separation of the essence and substance of God, and his reinterpretation of biblical texts typically associated with trinitarian arguments, tactics that would later be used by English thinkers. Indeed, in the most interesting section of this chapter, Mortimer demonstrates the influence of Socinian ideas on English antitrinitarians such as Paul Best and John Biddle. Two particular objections to the Trinity are identified here: firstly, that it was a doctrine promoted by clerics in order to bolster their power; and, secondly, that it was a relatively recent addition to Christianity, unknown to early believers. Consequently, many of these Englishmen, like the Socinians, argued that the Trinity was at best inessential to true religion, and at worst idolatrous. Mortimer also identifies strands of such thought in the academic realm, uncovering some particularly interesting unpublished tracts by Oxford scholar Robert Grebby that show signs of a serious engagement with Socinian ideas.

Indeed, this chapter is an excellent example of Mortimer?s use of sources, which she approaches in a thorough and sensitive manner. Although, by its very nature, the study predominantly draws from contemporary printed material, it greatly benefits from occasional analysis of correspondence and other related manuscript material, such as Grebby?s tracts. At times, however, the reader is placed at a disconcerting distance from the evidence, as Mortimer tends to be more explanatory than demonstrative. Perhaps, therefore, the arguments might have benefited from more thorough quotation and overt textual analysis, allowing us to see more of how evidence was used and conclusions reached.

In chapter seven, Mortimer briefly and subtly recasts the toleration debate of the 1640s and early 1650s in order to demonstrate why Socinianism became such an important polemic concept in later years. Thus, she investigates the discussions surrounding liberty of conscience, and the problems faced in drawing a line that would divide those doctrines which were included from those that were not. Here she suggests that Independent ministers in particular sought to define heresy in a reaction against Presbyterian moves to condemn heterodoxy, which often assumed that this was a self-evident concept. Thus, they were faced with the challenge of sketching the fundamentals of Christianity and asserting the right of the authority of the civil magistrate in matters of religion. Such a project, which was to be underpinned by scripture, faced challenges from antitrinitarianism, which continued to prove hard to adequately discredit on the basis of biblical reading. For this reason, Independents such as John Owen turned to Socinianism as a convenient polemical target. Mortimer suggests that by pursuing an unpopular group whose held numerous beliefs he wished to oppose in the early 1650s, Owen hoped to promote his view of a trinitarian settlement, whilst also condemning certain problematic heresies. Although met with mixed success, it was a tactic that would gain some momentum in subsequent years.

Accordingly, chapter eight follows this theme further into the 1650s, examining importance of Socinianism in debates about the future of the church in Cromwellian England. Here Mortimer argues that the spectre of Socinianism gained corporeal form, developing from a polemic tool into a genuinely perceived threat to the Independent vision of church settlement. With a continued focus on John Owen, this chapter demonstrates how in the early 1650s, Socinianism continued to serve as a useful polemic target for discrediting multiple theological positions at once, particularly religious individualism and the separation of nature and religion. Yet by 1653, Socinian ideas appeared to develop into a legitimate challenge to Independent ideals, thriving in a time of ?growing disillusionment? with Calvinism as core texts began to spread throughout the academic and clerical world (p. 212). Indeed, in the mid-1650s, positive (yet selective) engagement with specific Socinian ideas appears more common, the practical and ethical implications of its reconciliation of grace and human freedom appealing to those English theologians frustrated by the doctrine of predestination. Accordingly, Mortimer identifies Socinianism elements within clashes over what constituted reasonable reading of scripture, particularly in the case of Biddle?s scripturally grounded yet highly contentious

rejection of the Trinity, as well as within religious debates surrounding the Instrument of Government.

Throughout this chapter, Mortimer?s arguments remain compelling, offering the nuanced and original interpretations of theological influence in these familiar debates. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which, rather than featuring at the centre of these debates, Socinianism appears to have been a minor (yet surely significant) part of a wider milieu of continental thought from which English ?anti-Calvinists? drew specific ideas to formulate their opposition. In many cases, such as with John Goodwin, Mortimer struggles to identify any direct interaction with Socinian ideas. This is often influence by one remove, filtered through the Remonstrant writers (such as Grotius)who many of these Englishmen certainly read. Unfortunately, without evidence of direct interaction, it can be hard to equate similarity of thought to Socinian influence, which somewhat jeopardises Mortimer?s argument that the sect?s theology was ?central? to political and religious debate at this time (pp. 2, 240).

Indeed, this is an issue which arises throughout the book. In some senses, it feels as though the case for Socinianism?s centrality in the debates discussed is somewhat overstated. As already noted, Socinian influence within the Tew Circle or the Royalist camp was actually limited to a few individuals. Equally, in discussing antitrinitarianism, Mortimer is forced to broaden her scope beyond Socinianism, as it only formed a small aspect of this debate, at least until being adopted as a polemical target. That said, if Mortimer does overstate her point, the lens of Socinianism nonetheless allows her to make a number of significant contributions to the intellectual, political and religious history of 17th-century England. Her greatest successes lie not so much in demonstrating the centrality of Socinianism, but instead in successfully broadening our understanding of the repertoire of intellectual influences at play in continental anti-Calvinism, antitrinitarianism and the impact this had on the English context. Accordingly, there is much to be learnt from this impressive study about a whole range of interrelated debates that were of central importance to the religious and political developments of the period.

The author thanks Dr Bell for his thoughtful review.

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