

The Church of England and Christian Antiquity. The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century

Review Number:

1092

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 June, 2011

Author:

Jean-Louis Quantin

ISBN:

9780199557868

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£98.00

Pages:

496pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Peter Webster

This splendid study is part of the admirable Oxford-Warburg Studies series dedicated to the history of scholarship, under the general editorship of Charles Hope and Ian Maclean. It is to be hoped, however, that it receives a far wider readership than that location might suggest, as Quantin's study has important contributions to make in a number of disparate fields.

Building on a formidable body of work on patristic reception in continental Europe, and in France in particular, this is the most substantial work thus far from Quantin's pen on England in English. It was foreshadowed in part by an important 1997 contribution to a collection of essays on the reception of the Fathers, edited in two volumes by Irena Backus; one of the few landmarks in a still sparsely populated scholarly landscape.⁽¹⁾ Its subject is the reception of the writings of the Fathers of the Christian church in England, and despite the subtitle it covers the period from Thomas Cranmer into the early 18th century. The work is built upon a monumental foundation of bibliographical scholarship and, along the way, it makes telling contributions to our knowledge of that field. It also makes useful and intriguing observations on the development of scholarly method in general, and on the curriculum of the English universities. These areas, suggestive though they are, are not however its prime concern, which is the authority attributed to the Fathers in theological controversy and their use in constructions of Anglican identity more widely.

For generations of Anglo-Catholic commentators on the Church of England, the use of the term Anglican in relation to the Elizabethan and Stuart churches would have caused no discomfort. Drawing on an interpretation given its shape by the preoccupations of the Oxford Movement, these apologists located

Anglican identity in an delicate and somewhat elusive balance between scripture, reason and tradition, of which the Fathers were part. Inherent in the Elizabethan settlement itself, this trinity of interlocking and mutually interpreting sources of authority was, according to this analysis, drawn out progressively more fully by Richard Hooker and Lancelot Andrewes and others. As Quantin observes in the introduction, such a reading has now waned as ecclesiastical history, at least in its older institutionally-focussed form, has both moved further towards the scholarly margins and by and large shed its presentist preoccupations. That being said, some echoes of this view of Anglican origins may still be heard in more recent general works, and one of the merits of Quantin's study is the considerable damage it does to lingering notions of Anglican exceptionalism within the wider Church.⁽²⁾

The narrative of change that Quantin presents is a complex one, tightly interwoven with the course of ecclesiastical politics. As such it is in sympathy with trends in recent writing on the period which has stressed the polemical contingency of positions that scholars once regarded as more fixed ⁽³⁾; positions that were peculiarly unstable in the Church of England since the Other against which they were defined wore alternatively Catholic or Calvinist masks (p. 404). English divines under Elizabeth did indeed regularly cite the Fathers as proof-texts in debate under certain circumstances. At base, however, the English church differed little from continental Reformed churches in its ultimate subjection of patristic authority to that of Scripture. If figures such as John Jewel appeared in debate to place the Fathers on an equal footing with Scripture, it was due to the unstable polemical circumstances of the moment, rather than to any more fundamental understanding. The Fathers were useful witnesses to the truth of Scripture and sometimes an aid to its interpretation; but the polemical contest with Catholic apologists meant that attempts to give the patristic witness any sort of autonomous status as a source of authority had to be resisted.

In chapters two and three, Quantin detects the beginning of a profound shift in the last years of Elizabeth's reign and under James I; but one that occurred as a result of several discrete developments. Hooker may be said to have cleared away some barriers to a higher view of tradition, but without ever asserting such a view himself. Many divines now associated with the Oxford anti-Calvinism of the 1590s, including Hadrian Saravia, Thomas Bilson, John Overall and Lancelot Andrewes all appear in a narrative of growing estrangement from continental Calvinism over doctrinal issues such as the descent of Christ into hell and the cessation of miracles. Under William Laud, this disillusionment with Reformed thought was transposed into a higher, more combative key, until in figures such as Richard Montagu and John Pocklington the Church of England seemed to have at least some apologists for a very catholic understanding of tradition indeed. However, as chapter four demonstrates, it yet required the shocks of 1642–60 to make the Fathers a central part of Anglican apologetics.

To be sure, the fluidity of thought during the caesura of civil war and Interregnum did see a marked swing away from the Fathers, but for different reasons. The period saw a resurgent Puritan scripturalism, more rigid than even under Edward VI; and Quantin is most enlightening on the influence of the work of the French Calvinist Jean Daillé and his *Traicté de l'employ des Saints Peres*, first published in Geneva in 1631. Although far from puritan in temper, the gradual publication of the more exploratory work from the circle of scholars associated with Great Tew, such as that of William Chillingworth and John Hales, also eroded the status of the Fathers. This was part of an intellectual project tending towards a church of the 'utmost doctrinal latitude' (p. 228) and one that found echoes in the later work of Jeremy Taylor.

Despite these trends, there were greater forces at work before 1660 that pushed Anglican apologists in the opposite direction. The restored Church of England had a profound sense of being assailed from both Roman Catholic apologists abroad and from radical Dissenters at home. Nourished by the fruits of a peculiarly fertile period in scholarship in the University of Oxford, it was natural that Anglican writers should develop an increasingly self-confident apology for episcopacy as an essential part of church polity, and a view of tradition that marked out clear divisions between the Church of England and both Rome and Dissent. By this time, there was a new synthesis that may reasonably be termed 'Anglicanism' (p. 398). The high-water mark was reached with the development by both Henry Dodwell and Herbert Thorndike of highly idiosyncratic theories of the nature of tradition, as described in chapter six. Although neither system was very widely influential before the 1690s, they represent the most successful attempts to develop a distinctively Anglican

theory of the nature of patristic authority. The story ends, however, with the new emphasis on the Fathers by Anglican apologists provoking an acutely dangerous reaction against Christian tradition as a whole amongst freethinkers in the 18th century: ‘Antiquity proved a Pandora’s box’ (p. 407).

Such is an inadequate sketch of a complex, imposing yet wholly convincing study. Quantin manages to hold together an account of the materials and temper of patristic scholarship with the polemical context that both shaped and was shaped by it. The book is integrated with the history of continental theology to a degree rarely achieved by scholars of the English church.⁽⁴⁾ It is also acutely observant of the degree to which the weight given to the Fathers was socially positioned. The barriers to access of the latest scholarship acted as a firewall against socially subversive enthusiasm; religious truth, especially after 1660, was best dispensed by ‘professionals, who had acquired esoteric knowledge through a lengthy apprenticeship’ (p. 406).

Supported by an imposing bibliography in multiple languages, this study is likely to remain the starting-point for further enquiry into the subject for many years. It ought to be of interest to historians of the English church, but also of theology, of scholarly method and of the universities. It deserves also to be noticed by those contemporary theologians concerned with the nature of the Anglican church, further denting as it does the notion of Anglican exceptionalism, at least in the 16th and early 17th centuries.

Notes

1. ‘The Fathers in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Theology’, in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West. From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden, 1997), ii, pp. 987-1008. See the bibliography of the volume under review for further works, in French, on Henry Dodwell, Daniel Whitby and others.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See, amongst many, H. R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism. A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1965); *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism*, ed. Geoffrey Rowell (Wantage, 1992).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, Peter Lake and Michael Questier, ‘Introduction’ to *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c.1560-1660*, ed. Lake and Questier (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. ix–xx.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For another work that succeeds in achieving such integration, see Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed. The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge, 1995).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author thanks Dr Webster for his generous review and has no comments to make.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1092#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/5524>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>