

A Confusion of Tongues: Britain's Wars of Reformation, 1625-42

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Nearly 30 years have passed since the publication of John Morrill's highly-influential article 'The religious context of the English Civil War'.⁽¹⁾ In an effort to redress what he perceived as a tendency (largely among Whig and Marxist historians) towards over-simplifying the causes of the Civil War, Morrill pointed to a wider framework of ideological crises – in addition to what he deemed 'functional crises' of government interaction – which he argued had spurred the English population into civil war. In doing so, Morrill articulated three 'quite distinct and separable' modes of opposition: what he called 'the localist, the legal-constitutionalist, and the religious'.⁽²⁾ Of all of these, Morrill ultimately maintained, it was the religious mode which must be credited with having provided a sufficiently powerful ideological language and intellectual framework for opposition to incite the violence of the Civil War.

As influential as this argument has been, such separations have not always sat easily with subsequent historians, relying as they do upon a relatively neat conception of early modern mentalities (especially notions of allegiance and identity) as cleanly compartmentalised and fully-formed. While the rubric itself has remained broadly intact, the lines of separation have been blurred by scholars of both the Civil Wars (or the ‘Wars of the Three Kingdoms’) and the 17th century more generally as they illuminate the deeper recesses of early modern thought. Close readings by John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and others of key 17th-century works have been complemented by exhaustive archive-based studies of the intellectual sinews which connected ‘church’ and ‘state’ in the minds of individuals and groups throughout the late 16th and 17th centuries in Britain and Ireland.⁽³⁾ In each instance, the connections between political, religious, and legal thought (categories which increasingly appear altogether too narrow) have been reconstructed through deft handling of early modern language and expert management of extant source material.

Charles W. A. Prior’s *A Confusion of Tongues: Britain’s Wars of Reformation, 1625–42* is a welcome addition to this vein of re-evaluation and reconstruction. The title, in itself, is a telling and well-chosen one, drawing attention from the outset to both the chronological limits of the text and the wider contention of the book regarding the centrality of religion (and, more specifically, Protestantism) to the ideological unfolding of the Civil Wars. Fundamental to this is Prior’s rejection of easy separations of ‘church and state’, ‘secular and religious’, choosing instead to describe ‘untidy mixture[s]’ (p. 17) made all the more volatile by their ambiguous composition. Such ambiguities, Prior argues, make the easy reconstruction of narratives of ‘modernity’ all the more difficult: for instance, the position broadly known as Erastianism – concerned with the assertion of secular sovereignty over the church and, by extension, often cited as an influential ideology in the carving out of the modern state – loses its ‘modern’ thrust when its origins are shown by Prior to have been built upon co-reliant theories of doctrine and liberty (p. 228). Such ‘elisions’ between religion, law and politics lie at the heart of this careful and meticulous study of the ideological spaces between churchmen and lawyers, rather than those of revolutionaries, royalists, and radicals. As these intellectuals grasped to define what had for (arguably) centuries been historically ambiguous – namely, church and realm – the chasm of Civil War opened before them.

Prior is, from the introduction to the text onward, quick to delineate its limits, and with good reason. As he suggests, pursuing the lengthy historical origins, geographical frontiers, and later implications of the crises he describes to their end would certainly have produced a much longer, and probably unwieldy, study. Prior sets his sights primarily upon Britain between 1625 and 1642, and centrally upon the Protestant church ‘as by law established’. Both foci deserve further qualification here. In the latter case, Prior notes in his introduction that treatment of the established church in Ireland is best left to other authoritative studies (referring the reader, in this case, to the work of John McCafferty). This, in itself, is perhaps an understandable choice on Prior’s part in order to provide a focussed treatment of the subject at hand; nevertheless, comparison of the blurred lines between church, law and history that existed (or were, indeed, created) in Ireland with those in Britain would undoubtedly have added further depth to Prior’s discussion and further weight to his wider case for the inseparability of ideas in these areas. Moreover, while Prior devotes a chapter to the question of Scotland within the wider divisions of church and state, the majority of the text is clearly more ‘English’ than ‘British’ in its focus: as will be discussed below, Scottish examples are skilfully employed in chapter four to show the resonance of church/state ambiguities in the ‘northern kingdom’, but the inclusion of Scotland largely ends there. This geographical scope also allows Prior to largely avoid treatment of Catholic and Dissenting communities as they related to the state, though he does make useful references on some occasions (notably in chapter four) in order to illustrate the more central issues relating to the Protestant rite. Once again, Prior is honest in admitting to these limitations and focussing on the task which he has set himself: namely, reconstructing the entangled relationship between the established church and the state.

Methodologically, Prior draws almost exclusively upon printed polemics in order to highlight both the breadth and intensity of debate during the period in question, offering in the meantime a bold challenge to existing historiography, with which he engages extensively. This is very much in keeping with Prior’s previous work, *Defining the Jacobean Church: The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603–1625* ⁽⁴⁾,

which likewise showcased the author's skill in close readings and the dissection of early modern language. Reliance upon such sources does raise further questions, but this will be discussed below. Nevertheless, insofar as Prior's aim is to reconstruct 'how writers grappled with contradictory and complex ideas about religion, sovereignty, law and history', the individuals and episodes around which the chapters revolve are well-chosen and highly illustrative.

Chapters are broadly thematic, employing specific individuals and exchanges in order to illuminate wider debates as the text moves chronologically forward towards 1642 and the onset of the Civil Wars in England. Chapters two and three serve to furnish the reader with the background to the debates which erupted in the 1630s and 1640s, venturing back into the 1580s in order to trace the intellectual source of conflicts over religious conformity and its relation to the political realm. Both chapters establish from the outset the plurality and inherent ambiguities of historicised conceptions of church and law borne out of fears of 'innovation'. As Prior reveals, the intellectual foundations upon which such debates were built (or re-built) were both rich and devious in their meanings: the writings of a large cast of lawyers (including Nicholas Fuller, Francis Bacon, James Morice, and Richard Cosin), clergy (including a section on William Laud), and antiquarians (Giles Widdowes, Peter Heylyn, John Williams, William Prynne, and others) are drawn together to reveal the overlap of these vernaculars. Prior deftly illustrates both the significance of the shifts which this engendered and the ambiguities which were subsequently thrown up in front of those who sought to define these relationships in subsequent generations. In essence, what Prior witnesses in these articulations is the near-perpetual spiralling outward of what constituted 'civil' and 'sacred' into wider and wider realms of debate. While many attempted to counteract these trends by forcing a neater definition, reaction and counteraction only layered complexity upon complexity. Illustrating this wider trend are specific and insightful analyses of debates on bowing, altars, the origins of the church, and other controversies familiar to historians of British and Irish religious history.

Having outlined these many entanglements, Prior shifts his discussion northward in chapter four, in which he addresses the claims to sovereignty of the Scottish Kirk within these broader questions of church and realm. As Prior notes, this is not 'an exhaustive examination of the debate over the National Covenant' (p. 83), but rather a tightly-focussed discussion of the myriad ways in which reformation in Scotland, especially once confronted with the Stuart union, was contested through these vernaculars of church, law, and history. What follows is largely a close reading of numerous key documents spanning the 1636–40 period (including the Canons of 1636, the National Covenant, and the 1639 *Remonstrance*) grounded upon a wide-ranging reading of contemporary antiquarian debate which aims at highlighting the terms by which 'the link between the purity of doctrine and the status of liberty ... [were] greatly amplified' through the 'imperial church' (p. 109).

With the origins of the Bishops' Wars and the larger terms of debate in Britain established more generally, Prior shifts his focus toward the Canons of 1640 (chapter five), 'Root and Branch' reform and the Protestation of May 1641 (chapter six). In these Prior finds illustrative examples of notions of liberty being tested on the aforementioned arguments about the civil and the sacred. History, in particular, takes centre stage in this portion of the text, with claims of orthodoxy, attempts at reform, and charges of innovation binding analysis of the thought of John Ley, Laud, Henry Vane the Younger, Edward Bagshaw, John Williams, Gerard Langbaine, Henry Burton, and a host of others. Among these debates Prior succeeds in finding not only the origins of the historical vernacular through which his authors described their understanding(s) of church and state (extending from the Elizabethan church to the Levitical priesthood), but also pinpoints the rifts and chasms which would ultimately divide them when questions of tradition, salvation, and governance clashed.

Prior's closing chapters, in contrast with those which precede them, adopt as their focus specific individuals and their works – namely Thomas Aston (1600–46) and Henry Parker (1604–52) – in order to highlight the feasibility of a constitutionally-grounded episcopacy (in the case of the former) and, in contrast, the utility of constitutionalist arguments in questioning the competency of regal authority and upholding the 'consent of the governed' (p. 225). Again, these examples are well-chosen, revealing in each case the extent to which the vernaculars which Prior has outlined in previous chapters could be pushed to the limits of what would be

Civil War divisions while nevertheless retaining common intellectual threads. The reader is ably guided through the various metamorphoses of these debates as they incorporate and synthesise ideas of church sovereignty, regal power, the role of parliament, the nature of law, and other weighty issues commonly grounded on both the momentum of tradition and the demands of circumstance. Prior maintains his central line of argument throughout these discussions, emphasising within each section and sub-section the inextricability of 'politics', 'religion', and 'law'. The conclusion is, as such, relatively short, but elegantly reiterates the complications evident in such terminology as 'Erastianism' and the dangers inherent in seeking monocausal explanations for the crises of the 1640s and 1650s (and beyond). Rather, through these examples, Prior suggests that it is precisely this polyphony (or dissonance) which should attract academic attention.

Such in-depth analysis of these debates inevitably provokes questions about the wider ramifications and iterations of these developing vernaculars. Prior actively adheres to a methodology which focuses on the meanings interwoven within the texts themselves, broadening outwards when the arguments are revisited or rejected in other printed texts. There is, consequently, little mention of the wider print culture of which these tracts may or may not have been a part. Clearly, as the ensuing debates discussed by Prior show, there was a readership for this sort of polemical writing, but how widely were they disseminated and what sort of impact were they intended to have? Moreover, while the erudite audience may have been fluent in these vernaculars (disputed as they might have been in terms of their connotations), were these vernaculars of any value beyond such learned spheres? Returning to the initial assertions made by John Morrill (and since revisited by scholars of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms), the question of how these abstractions regarding the church and state were subsequently conveyed and absorbed by the literate, quasi-literate, and illiterate alike is made all the more relevant here. These are, however, questions about the wider cultural and social circumstances of these debates prompted by the strength of Prior's analysis; Prior has not fallen short in dealing with his expressed focus, which is the particular content of the ideas and their meanings. What Prior has succeeded admirably in producing in *A Confusion of Tongues* is a concise and elegant reconstruction of the ways in which one end of this spectrum articulated and negotiated these ideas before the entire structure which they were attempting to describe teetered into nothingness.

Notes

1. John Morrill, 'The religious context of the English Civil War', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 34 (1984), 155-78.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid, 157.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for instance, Jeffrey Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, (Oxford, 2005); Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland and England*, (Oxford, 2007); Anthony Milton, *Laudian and Royalist Polemic in Seventeenth Century England: The Career and Writings of Peter Heylyn*, (Manchester, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Charles Prior, *Defining the Jacobean Church: The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603–1625* (Cambridge, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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