

Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590-1640

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Preaching before James I early in his reign, Anthony Maxey told the King that predestination ‘containeth the whole summe of our religion’ (p. 1). The 17th article of the Church of England’s doctrinal statement, the Thirty-Nine Articles, had been statutory since 1571, and outlined a belief in predestination. In this interesting book, Leif Dixon is keen that the historian leaves their modern assumptions at the door of historical investigation. The idea of predestination is one which leaves many people today feeling theologically cold, and it has become fair game to presume that those who attended Church of England services at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries probably felt the same, especially given that their parish minister probably not only believed in the doctrine, but actively preached it too, at least in some form. (1) Dixon, though, does not believe this, and boldly proclaims in his introduction that rather than predestinarian beliefs resulting in a generation of spiritually anxious English parishioners, the doctrine and its promotion actually had much potential for providing spiritual comfort (p. 7). Indeed, the Jacobean preacher Richard Crakanthorp told a congregation at St. Mary’s church in Oxford that predestination was ‘the chiefest comfort which can enter into the heart of a mortall man’ (p. 2).

To outline very briefly a definition of predestinarian theology in pre-Civil War England (Dixon does not provide the reader with any concise definition), the 17th article of the Thirty-Nine Articles (passed by Parliament in 1571) speaks of individuals being predestined by God to salvation, but is silent on the idea of ‘the double decree’, promoted by many advocates of predestinarian theology during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, that God essentially decreed both ways, to damnation (reprobation) as well as to salvation (election). Most of the writers explored by Dixon believed that whilst humans’ statuses in the afterlife were

decreed before birth (and some would even have said before the Fall), they would only gain the means to fulfil their election after being ‘regenerated’ by the Holy Spirit, granting the individual the gift of true, saving faith, prompting the individual to repentance, whereupon different writers placed varying emphases on the extent to which individuals could experience ‘assurance’ (or a certainty of salvation) in their earthly lives. Despite the lack of a concise definition of predestination, Dixon does throughout the book provide an admirable attempt to unravel the various strands of what he labels as ‘practical’ predestinarianism, a term which he prefers to the longer established ‘experimental’, which he believes over-stresses the extent to which those whom we might term as ‘predestinarians’ were worried about securing assurance of their election (pp. 10-1). Rather, ‘practical’ predestinarian writers consciously set out to ‘tackle problems which troubled believers’ (p. 98). Nonetheless, it is fair to observe that most of Dixon’s writers were concerned about assurance in some form, even if (like Robert Sanderson) their main interest was to point out that it led dangerously towards assertions of one’s own salvation (p. 223).

I should make explicit here that I found this book to be a really stimulating read, and it has much to offer the historian, with Dixon having a talent for clarifying and explaining dense theological ideas. My review will, though, be biased towards the second half of the book, where I think that there are some issues to be addressed. These issues by no means detract from the broad success of the book, but they are issues which I would have liked to have seen Dixon engage with.

Chapter one acts as both a chronological overview of predestinarian doctrine up to and including John Calvin, and also continues from the introduction to outline Dixon’s statement of intent for the book. Dixon is keen throughout the book to argue that doctrinal issues did not exist in some kind of vacuum in the upper echelons of the Church or at the universities, but rather had a practical pastoral dimension which responded to the reality that by the late 16th century those who primarily needed conversion in England were no longer Catholics, but ‘lukewarm Protestant[s]’ (pp. 24, 27). Particularly relevant to this pastoral view is what might be seen as the reinvigoration during the 16th-century reformations of predestinarian doctrines, which had a long tradition in Christian theology dating back to Paul’s epistles and Augustine of Hippo (pp. 20-1). Emerging out of what Dixon points to as the epistemological crises which followed the Black Death in the mid-14th century, when a grievous punishment from God prompted questioning of precisely how a sufficient repentance worthy of salvation could be obtained, predestination, with its focus upon God’s mercy, offered some comfort that salvation could be obtained even if the repentance offered was by no means worthy of salvation (pp. 40-3).

Chapters two to five of this book analyse the works of five individual theologians to explore the nature of their practical predestinarianism. Chapter two focuses upon the thought of William Perkins, a Cambridge academic who was arguably Elizabethan England’s most famous theologian. For Perkins, the regenerated individual had come into knowledge of the Holy Spirit (p. 82). Thus, in terms of sin, and to borrow Perkins’ own metaphor, the regenerate individual may set off from London to Berwick, and may stray off course en route, but their God-given propensity is to return to the correct route, and to reach eternal life (p. 122). Despite Perkins’ obvious fame, historians have sometimes been guilty of neglecting his influence, and Dixon provides much to ponder. Rather than being a Church of England apologist (as William Patterson has recently claimed), Dixon argues that the reasons which Perkins advanced for non-separation from the Church of England in his *Exposition upon the Whole Epistle of Jude* (written in the 1590s and printed posthumously in 1606) were actually framed by an implicit caveat.⁽²⁾ When predestinarian preaching was banned in 1626 (Dixon mistakenly says 1628, when university disputations on the topic were banned), a generation of ministers brought up on Perkins must have been acutely aware that one of his reasons for non-separation was that the Church of England taught predestinarian theology (p. 90).⁽³⁾ This theological context perhaps makes it all the more remarkable that generally speaking, the imposition of ‘Laudian’ ceremonial policies during the 1630s under Charles I and Archbishop William Laud was typified more by compliance than by resistance.⁽⁴⁾

Discussed together in chapter three are two writers and ministers, Richard Greenham and Richard Rogers, who, like Perkins, are often banded together under the label of ‘puritan’ (p. 133). From the outset of the book, Dixon follows Peter Lake’s well known definition of puritanism as being ‘a distinctive style of piety

and divinity', and it can be comfortably asserted that Perkins, Greenham and Rogers all fit to some degree within Lake's definition (p. 14).⁽⁵⁾ However, whilst Greenham spent most of his clerical career labouring at Dry Drayton, just outside of Cambridge, Rogers was a lecturer at Wethersfield in Essex, who had come to rest somewhat awkwardly within the Church of England after the failure of the Elizabethan classis movements (pp. 124-30). It is fair to observe that in terms of advanced protestantism, Dry Drayton was not Wethersfield, and whilst Greenham dedicated his written works to providing comfort to anxious souls, and trying to point towards potential signs of election (pp. 132-3), Rogers was confident that he was addressing not only an elect but an assured readership, who just needed some help in ensuring that they could enjoy the blessings of their assurance that could be enjoyed in their earthly lives (pp. 147, 153-5, 157). The obvious problem with Rogers' *Seven Treatises* is that for those who doubted that they were elect, Rogers' advice was simply to attend sermons and pray (p. 153). At least Rogers' editor, Stephen Egerton, was able to offer some hope by suggesting that the fact that the reader had chosen to purchase and read Rogers' treatise offered a good indication that they were heading down the correct path (p. 171). Thus, right at the heart of English reformed protestantism, we are confronted with what Bob Scribner memorably called 'a distinctive Protestant form of sacramentalism', and even Rogers' editor believed that those 'who *are in Christ* already' (Rogers' phrase, p. 130) might have needed a little extra prompting to reach the assurance which Rogers all but took for granted.⁽⁶⁾

The relatively short chapter four offers an interesting discussion of the Canterbury preacher Thomas Wilson, who believed that those who had been regenerated could not be anything other than assured of their salvation, and thus denied the position of Richard Greenham, who saw dealing with affliction as an important part of an elect life (p. 190). One of the strengths of these individual case studies is how Dixon links the ideas of each new theologian back to those already discussed, and whilst he observes that Wilson's theology sounds very much like that of Richard Rogers, there was a crucial difference in that Wilson was much more pastorally aware than Rogers, believing that even the reprobate had a right to receive compassionate pastoral care from their minister (p. 196). This pastoral concern is perhaps manifested most obviously in the final printed work of Wilson's lifetime, his *Saints by Calling* (1620), where Dixon suggests that Wilson moved away from his earlier position that the elect could not be anything other than assured, and instead focused on helping those with weak faith transform it into a strong, assuring faith (p. 200). Unlike Greenham, though, whose elect still held fear of reprobation, Wilson's elect continued to hold no such fears, and any lack of assurance stemmed from temporary feelings of separation from God, rather than from any genuine doubts about their election (p. 202).

The remaining three chapters of this book are the ones with which I would most like to critically engage. In chapter five, Dixon explores the much studied career of Robert Sanderson, a Lincolnshire rector who rose during the first decade of Charles I's reign to become a royal chaplain, and who, after the Restoration, became bishop of Lincoln. As Dixon acknowledges, he broadly follows the argument advanced by Peter Lake in his important article about Sanderson, that Sanderson enjoyed preferment during the 1630s (when Laudian ideas of ceremonialism and sacramentalism were being imposed upon the Church) without ever abandoning his predestinarianism (p. 211).⁽⁷⁾ By clinging to the 17th article's definition of predestination (so avoiding the double decree), he was able to preach predestinarianism (banned since 1626) before the King without rebuke, and by holding an approach to ecclesiology broadly in tune with the late Elizabethan archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, he could accommodate himself to the regime by accepting that ceremonies were essentially matters indifferent (pp. 238, 243). Perhaps most pertinently, Sanderson shared the Laudians' view of puritans being subversives (p. 239).

I think that another look is needed at Sanderson's sermon at Boston in 1619. The vicar there was John Cotton, who, by covenanting together in 1615 the more religious members of his parish, had effected a separation of the likely elect from the likely reprobate. In his sermon, Sanderson essentially separated evangelical qualities from the more iconoclastic (and subversive) elements of puritanism, thus creating a narrow definition of puritanism which he could wield against Cotton's congregation (pp. 215-21). Two observations may be made. Cotton later admitted (or boasted) that the situation at Boston was 'more than the old Non-conformity'.⁽⁸⁾ What Sanderson was tackling, in effect, was a caricature of puritanism, and Lake

highlights that Sanderson (like keen Laudians) had no real conception of moderate puritanism.⁽⁹⁾ If we are to be cynical about Sanderson, it is worth noting (as neither Lake nor Dixon does) the context in which the Boston sermon was printed in 1622 at the height of the crisis about Prince Charles' proposed marriage to the Spanish Infanta, with Sanderson conveniently presenting a view of puritanism with which James I must have felt increasing sympathy.⁽¹⁰⁾ Perhaps significantly, the printed version was dedicated to George Montaigne, Sanderson's former diocesan bishop at Lincoln who had recently benefited from the shifting political sands by being translated to London.⁽¹¹⁾ At the time of print, Sanderson was thus being rather clever, appropriating a Calvinist vision which James would surely have approved of, and turning it against the subversive nature of puritanism. As is well known, such a view of puritanism became one of the pillars of Laudian policy during the 1630s. My second point is more theological, in that I think that Dixon misses what is one of Lake's most interesting points about Sanderson's Boston sermon. The theology which Sanderson advanced at Boston was essentially taken from William Perkins. The point which Lake makes well, and which Dixon misses, is that the predestinarian world had moved on from Perkins (who had died in 1602), with Cotton's close friend John Preston (who is only discussed very superficially by Dixon) recently arguing that the assured could be confident that they were saved, thus essentially providing the theological backdrop to Cotton's covenant.⁽¹²⁾ Sanderson, in returning to Perkins' somewhat more nuanced approach, was thus trying to rewind the theological clock, and though Dixon muses upon what a stir Sanderson must have prompted at Boston that day, one cannot help but wonder if any stir was more one of wandering glances at hearing a sermon preached at least a decade too late (p. 216). It is worth saying here that Dixon downplays English predestinarians' interest in assurance, but if that is the case, the writers whom he studies certainly wasted a lot of breath and ink over its relative merits and demerits.

I will consider chapters six and seven together, as (though both chapters contain much interesting discussion) I think that they both ultimately suffer from the same problem. Chapter six attempts to uncover the nature of predestinarian preaching during the reign of James I (1603-25), and Dixon follows Arnold Hunt's conclusion that predestination was widely preached (p. 262). In explaining to their parishioners the potentially testing situation that effort did not necessarily equate to a saving faith, the case of Christ's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, provided a handy example that choosing to repent did not necessarily mean that one was elect (pp. 269, 273-4). In terms of the topics of their sermons, Dixon points out that amongst the preachers discussed in this book, Richard Rogers was unusual in not believing that salvation should be preached to all, and thus, whilst sinners were often the target of sermons, the issue of reprobation was largely left to God's secret will (pp. 281-2, 289). The dissemination of predestinarian ideas is also the implicit focus of chapter seven, about funeral sermons, the printed versions of which were often cheap to purchase, and written in a more accessible style than theological treatises (p. 312). Interestingly, Dixon points to the continuing popularity in a belief in the importance of the *ars moriendi* as a reflection of a good death reflecting a settled state of mind (p. 340). Dixon also argues that preachers were much more likely to pronounce states of election upon the deceased than of reprobation. Whilst this may have been tactful, on the other hand, printed sermons tended to focus on deceased individuals whom the reader would suspect was elect, and if the workings of the Holy Spirit ensured that the godly were brought together, as they presumably would have been at the funerals of godly individuals, then Dixon's observation that ministers did not dwell upon the intricacies of predestination in their funeral sermons becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as at such occasions, they probably did not need to focus on such matters (pp. 339-40).

I do think that there are some problems with these two concluding chapters. The most pressing is that whilst, in fairness to Dixon, he does explicitly state that the book is not attempting to examine the reception of predestinarian sermons or writings, this does sometimes create a feeling (particularly noticeable in chapters six and seven) that only half a story is being told (pp. 7-9). The failure to cite any non-printed contemporary sources further adds to the impression that a broader context is lacking. At one point, Dixon envisages the self-consciously godly as outwardly burying simmering differences, but in private thinking of each other in rather Perkinsesque terms as 'hypocrites', but much evidence aside from theological treatises and sermons points to the fellowship which the self-consciously godly drew from each others' company (pp. 292-3).⁽¹³⁾ This lack of a broader context can be linked back to the point which I made at the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, that in 1642, the Lancashire minister John Angier recorded in his diary that he was

pleased that most of his late wife's 'friends' had been able to attend her funeral, where her kinsman, Alexander Horrocks, had preached to the presumably godly congregation on a suitably uplifting text from St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, that 'the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord'.⁽¹⁴⁾ One further small point is that Dixon does not refer to John Ley's famous funeral sermon for the godly Chester widow, Jane Ratcliffe. Whilst it may seem churlish to pick on the omission of one sermon, it is a particularly notable printed sermon in that in his preface, Ley labels Lady Brilliana Harley and Lady Alice Lucy as 'Elect Ladies', and the addressing of individuals as 'elect' during their own lifetimes is a potentially interesting topic sadly rather neglected by Dixon, particularly as pointing to certain godly individuals as being elect presumably had some pastoral purpose.⁽¹⁵⁾

To conclude, Dixon has produced a book of much worth, and has obviously spent much time thinking about many printed works which (to be blunt) are sometimes not the easiest for the modern mind to comprehend. He deserves great credit for the way in which he has unravelled these strands to produce some thought-provoking arguments, and I think that the case studies of individual theologians, where Dixon allows his talent for exposition its full expression, are the strongest parts of the book. I hope that other scholars will build upon this work to further uncover one of the most important psychological impulses during this fascinating half-century in English history.

Notes

1. Christopher Haigh, 'The taming of the Reformation: preachers, pastors and parishioners in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *History*, 85 (2000), pp. 572-88.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. W. B. Patterson, 'William Perkins as apologist for the Church of England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 57 (2006), pp. 252-69.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590-1640* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 77, 167.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. This impression of broad compliance is mine. For an overview of 'Laudian' policies, see Andrew Foster, 'Church Policies of the 1630s', in *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Politics and Religion 1603-1642*, eds. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (Harlow, 1989), pp. 193-223.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter Lake, 'Defining Puritanism – again?', in *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith*, ed. Francis J. Bremer (Boston, MA, 1993), p. 6.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Robert W. Scribner, 'The Reformation, popular magic, and the 'Disenchantment of the World'', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 23 (1993), p. 484.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Peter G. Lake, 'Serving God and the Times: The Calvinist Conformity of Robert Sanderson', *Journal of British Studies*, 27 (1988), pp. 81-116.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Quoted in Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559-1625* (Oxford, 1982), p. 270.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Lake, 'Robert Sanderson', p. 112.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, 'The ecclesiastical policy of King James I', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), pp. 198-202.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Robert Sanderson, *Two Sermons: Preached... at Boston* (London, 1622), dedication.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Lake, 'Robert Sanderson', pp. 96-100.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Collinson, *Religion of Protestants*, pp. 268-9.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. 'John Angier's Diary', in *Oliver Heywood's Life of John Angier of Denton*, ed. Ernest Axon, Chetham Society, third series, xcvi (1937), p. 126.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. John Ley, *A Patterne of Pietie* (London, 1640), dedication.[Back to \(15\)](#)

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/66732>