

The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation: Glory, Laud and Honour

Review Number:

589

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 May, 2007

Author:

Graham Parry

ISBN:

9781843832089

Date of Publication:

2006

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

247pp.

Publisher:

Boydell & Brewer

Publisher url:

<http://www.boydell.co.uk/43832089.HTM>

Place of Publication:

Woodbridge

Reviewer:

Grant Tapsell

Throughout my reading of Professor Parry's new book I was distracted by a low, angry, buzzing noise. On reflection, I realized it was the sound of Hugh Trevor-Roper spinning in his grave. The scale of the chasm between the two authors can scarcely be exaggerated. Trevor-Roper's biography of Archbishop William Laud, first published in 1940, must represent one of the most gloriously imperfect matches of author and subject in the whole canon of historical writing. It was motivated by a depthless disdain for clerical pretension—a characteristic of Trevor-Roper's that has become still clearer after the recent publication of some of his vast correspondence. From this intensely erastian viewpoint, Laud could hardly be excelled as an example of prelatial arrogance and megalomania. Professor Parry adopts a very different perspective. He celebrates the achievements of a brief 'Anglican Counter-Reformation' in the arts, and presents Laud as the key figure in that movement. In so doing he obliquely offers one of the most convincing explanations for the English Civil Wars I have ever read.

The book divides fairly neatly into two halves. The first consists of four chapters dealing with the physical context for worship within the Church of England in the 1620s and 1630s. We are given extended discussions of church building in this period; the renovation of cathedrals; changes in Oxbridge college chapels; and the style in which churches were furnished. Parry's key theme is the zeal with which Laudians sought to create an appropriately splendid setting in which to worship God. Here the most important model was the Temple of Solomon, vividly evoked in II Chronicles 3, and praised by David for its 'beauty of

holiness' in the ninety-sixth Psalm. Puritans were quite wrong to have swept away much of the material magnificence of the medieval English church in the mistaken belief that they were cleansing it of pernicious popery. Indeed they were not just wrong, they were actively impious. The Cambridge scholar and poet Richard Crashaw blasted the 'sluttishness' he felt puritans promoted with their plain services: churches would be 'consecrate to none,/Or to a new God *Desolation*' (p. 141). According to the antiquary, William Somner, puritans would 'level' all churches and worship instead 'in some empty barne' (p. 180). Some readers may feel that something of an over-reaction ensued: painted glass and cherubs on ceilings; railed-in altars on raised chancels; fonts submerged beneath vast and elaborate covers; rich altar cloths and communion plate; carved choir screens and costly organs—all can be found in many of the churches, chapels, and cathedrals that Parry evokes in loving detail. Several key sites draw particular attention: Abbey Dore under the munificent patronage of Viscount Scudamore; St Paul's during and after Laud's time as bishop of London; and the magnificent stained glass windows in the chapels of Wadham, Lincoln, and University Colleges in Oxford.

Throughout this first half of the book, Parry repeatedly draws attention to the 'neglect' that church buildings had endured during the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. The University Church of Great St Mary's in Cambridge, for instance, suffered from a 'general air of shabbiness and disorder' (p. 84). Fortunately for the Church of England, Laud rode to the rescue. After his installation as archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, 'He found the chapel at Lambeth [palace] in a neglected condition; the last faltering decade of George Abbot's primacy had been a time of protracted decline in the ordering and maintenance of the Church in so many ways' (p. 43). (We learn later that Abbot had nevertheless shown, 'willingness to commission images in glass and stone' in other churches in the 1620s: p. 104.) Crucially, the Laudian movement worked hand-in-glove with Charles I. To pluck just one example from many, nowhere was this co-operation clearer than in St George's chapel in Windsor castle, home to the Order of the Garter, which Charles re-vamped during his reign. A silver communion service costing £742 was commissioned and then consecrated in a special service in October 1637 (p. 112). More than a thousand ounces of silver were subsequently required to make candlesticks for the chapel and covers for the Bible and Book of Common Prayer.

The second half of the book addresses the less tangible aspects of the 'Laudian style' that were the natural and logical corollaries of this change in the physical context for worship. In modern computer terms, if the church structures provided the Laudian 'hardware', the prose, poetry, music, and antiquarian writings that Parry discusses over four chapters were the movement's 'software'. Once again, the tale is one of renovation after a period of neglect: 'A distinct deficiency of the Elizabethan Church of England was the inadequate provision for private devotion' (p. 113). And just as Laudians had exploited foreign artisans to beautify their churches, so they looked to the continent for models of literary and artistic activity. Pious laymen and women at Little Gidding pasted Flemish engravings of biblical scenes into their concordances; clerics were attracted by the liturgical developments then fashionable in Jesuit circles; and elaborate Italian verse forms were taken up by English poets. The book ends with a chapter on the role played by antiquaries in attempting to defend the Laudian church from the kind of sacrilege that some felt the Church of England had endured from the Henrician dissolution of the monasteries onwards. The civil wars and interregnum represented a catastrophic failure for the Laudian movement, but even in 1658 William Dugdale could publish his *History of St Paul's Cathedral*. In Parry's words, this book was,

an eloquent indictment of the depraved religious values that now hold sway in London, a protest against puritan barbarism by a man who remembers a mode of worship before the Civil War that revered the past and preserved in a judiciously reformed way many of the best devotional practices of the ancient faith (p. 177).

Is this last quote intended simply as a summary of Dugdale's position, or is it also a reflection of Professor Parry's own views? Throughout *The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation*, there is a clear sense that Laudians deserve praise as liberal benefactors of the arts, and that puritans should be condemned for their philistinism. It is not obvious that this judgemental position enhances the book as a whole, particularly when

it comes to the handling of evidence. Forced to rely on William Prynne's hostile account of the stained glass in Lambeth palace chapel, Parry nevertheless emphasizes the nature of Prynne's 'poisoned pen' and notes that he had a 'lawyer's eye for incriminating detail' (p. 44). Eight pages later, no such pejorative terms are used to describe Peter Heylyn when Parry quotes his critical description of John Williams, bishop of Lincoln, as, 'a perfect Diocese within himself, as being Bishop, Dean, Prebend, Residentiary, and Parson, and all these at once' (p. 52). Williams may well—as Parry notes—have been a 'notorious pluralist', but using the adoring biographer of Williams's arch-enemy Laud to make the argument is hardly providing a balanced perspective. (Nor are Laudians like Christopher Wren the elder criticized for *their* pluralism: p. 92.) There remains a sense in which for Parry all right thinking and reasonable people *ought* to have been Laudians. Antiquaries, for instance, are presented as men of conservative temperament, hostile to puritan iconoclasm: 'The desire to preserve was usually accompanied by a disposition to approve the High Church practices that gave prominence to formality, order and decorum in matters of worship, and respect for the traditions and appointments of the church' (p. 178). What William Prynne might have made of this argument is not considered. Certainly Parry ignores the widespread tradition of puritan—and, later, nonconformist—antiquarian studies that just as rigorously sought to provide historical antecedents for a very different vision of the Church of England. Puritan criticism of Laudian activity is revealingly described as 'sniffing hostility' (p. 70). Yet was it not just as valid as Wentworth's sneering description of the tomb created in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, by the puritanical Richard Boyle? Those seeking to 'do reverence to God' could not do so without 'crouching to an Earl of Cork and his lady... or to those sea-nymphs his daughters, with coronets upon their heads, their hair dishevelled, down upon their shoulders' (p. 186)? This notwithstanding the fact that Boyle had paid to have the cathedral chancel raised and paved.

Three further substantial problems with this study can be identified. The first is one of chronology. Despite an extensive contextual first chapter, Professor Parry never seems comfortable delineating when exactly the changes he seeks to chronicle begin. To give one physical example, he describes the installation of new painted glass windows in Wadham chapel in the mid 1610s, 'somewhat before the movement for beautification got underway' (p. 60). Some of the artists involved may also have been associated with windows in Hatfield House's chapel, installed around 1610 by order of Robert Cecil, earl of Salisbury. Although noting that this was a 'bold advance', Parry undercuts Cecil's importance by describing him as 'a law unto himself', someone who 'could breach the taboo against imaged glass with impunity' (p. 101). Not only does this bald statement ignore Pauline Croft's important published work on the developing nature of Robert Cecil's religious beliefs, it also begs the question of what we should recognize as being signs of things to come, rather than just freak aberrations. Despite highly deferential early use of Nicholas Tyacke's *Anti-Calvinists*, Parry seems ill at ease when it comes to offering any sense of the trajectory of Arminian development. Perhaps this is because he is happier speaking of Laudianism (see 'A Note on Terminology', p. xi), the specifically English external manifestations of a continental doctrinal that had very different outcomes in the United Provinces. Hence the uncertain gap between the period of Hooker's writings (especially pp. 14–18) and the emergence of Laud, Cosin, and Wren, especially from the mid 1620s. Here Lancelot Andrewes looms very large indeed, but in a curiously uncertain way. His influence on future stars of the Laudian firmament is stressed (mainly through reliance on Peter McCullough's excellent and ongoing research: esp. pp. 19–21), even to the extent of the off-hand comment that 'Andrewes' disciples—for that is what Laud, Wren, Cosin and their associates were, in effect—maintained the style of churchmanship that he had developed' (p. 19). So important does Andrewes eventually become in this book that by the final paragraph I wondered why he, rather than Laud, was not named in the subtitle: 'A whole new world of religious art and expression was called into being by the refining of devotional practices by Bishop Andrewes and his followers' (p. 192).

A second substantial problem with *The Arts of the Anglican Counter-Reformation* is the overall issue of substance. What was it that unified the Laudian movement? And what justification can be offered for placing Laud at the heart of a movement in the arts? These may seem ridiculous questions. Laud's influence as, consecutively, bishop of London and archbishop of Canterbury, and his enormous success in dominating Charles I's ear, cannot be doubted. Nevertheless, Laud's own extensive writings are barely utilized. This is unfortunate with regard to the key theme of the book, but it is also unfortunate because it contributes to the

lack of a broader contextual awareness of political and factional conflict. A key figure here is undoubtedly John Williams, bishop of Lincoln. This shadowy, serpentine figure haunted—literally and metaphorically—Laud's dreams. Perhaps their royal master might one day chose to supplant Laud with Williams as the main conduit for his royal favour and bounty to the church? This explains Laud's relentless and ultimately successful effort to destroy Williams by any possible means. Yet if such a change of fortune ever had occurred, what would have been the impact on the arts? Parry himself notes that Williams was 'the most energetic improver' of Westminster abbey in the early Stuart period, and may have spent up to £4,500 on beautifying the church (p. 52). He also spent vast sums on beautifying the chapel of Lincoln College, Oxford, prompting Parry to reflect that although factional rivals, 'in most respects Williams and Laud were in agreement over outward forms of worship that honoured Christ in a dignified, harmonious and beautiful ethos' (p. 65). Yet Williams was hardly a Laudian.

What then gave Laudianism its distinctive artistic character? Indeed did it have one at all? Early on in the book we are told that, 'An integrated cultural revival centred on the Church was in process when it was brusquely curtailed by the calling of the Long Parliament and the arrest of its greatest patron and advocate, Archbishop William Laud' (p. 6). Fifteen pages later the claim is diluted: 'It should be said that there never was an explicit programme of church decoration promoted by the High Church bishops that one could firmly label as "Laudian"' (p. 21). The terms of debate continue to shift. In his chapter 'furnishing the church', Parry notes that, 'The extent to which religious painting was revived in Laudian times is difficult to answer' (p. 105). In the chapter on 'church music', after two and a half pages of discussion of his work we are told that, 'One cannot really claim Orlando Gibbons as a Laudian composer, for his style was formed well before Laudian forms of worship took hold in the Church' (p. 161). George Herbert's poetry also merits extensive discussion, though ultimately qualified in similarly cautious fashion: 'He was undoubtedly attracted to "the beauty of holiness" ideal, but wary of loving beauty more than holiness, and feared lest the pleasures of art should distract from the worship of God' (p. 139). The rather deflating logic of all this is acknowledged in the conclusion: 'No particular style predominated. What we encounter in the Laudian church of the 1630s is an English version of the Counter-Reformation, without a unifying artistic style' (p. 191). So what was the Laudian artistic vision? Or were there several? (Occasionally we read of 'moderate' Laudians: the question of hard-liners is not explicitly addressed.) Ultimately Parry seems to equate the shift from some kind of proto-Laudian tendencies in Andrewes to outright Laudianism in the 1630s simply with an increasingly brusque and authoritarian style of enforcement. Yet this was a political or tactical change, not a thoroughgoing artistic one. Perhaps ultimately Laudianism's coherence was more apparent than real, with puritan critics making no distinction between the activities of those Parry prefers simply to call 'High Church' and those who were—or would after the end of the civil wars become in exile—Catholics, such as, for example Richard Crashaw, the poet (pp. 143–4), and the organ-maker Robert Dallam (pp. 169–70). And when Cosin could initiate Latin services in Peterhouse chapel (pp. 167–8), or when the IHS symbol so beloved by Jesuits could gain such currency in Laudian decorative patterns (pp. 31, 35, 82, 111, 115, 130, 144), who could blame them? The significance of the puritan perspective only becomes greater when—as Parry notes (p. 89)—we are often reliant on critical documents written by puritan iconoclasts for our knowledge of now lost Laudian furnishings.

The third and final substantial criticism that could be levelled at this book is that of its use of evidence, both primary and secondary. Too often the reader is offered a catalogue-style description of a church, or an author, with little attempt to draw out broader issues or arguments. To cite just one chapter, that on Oxbridge chapels simply proceeds from Wadham (pp. 59–62) to Lincoln (pp. 62–6) to University (pp. 67–9), and so on, and so on. This is a pity as it precludes consolidated discussion of some important themes. I was struck, for instance, by the persistent use of the language of drama by both Laudians and puritans. As the puritan minister Peter Smart put it when criticizing the style of worship in Durham Cathedral during Cosin's time as bishop, the ceremony of the Eucharist was 'turned wel neere into a theatricall stage play' (p. 2). For his part, the Laudian antiquary William Somner prophetically wrote in 1640, 'pray we that Anarchy never get possession of our Stage, lest Confusion shut up the Scene' (pp. 184–5). (In a particularly cruel irony, Somner's loving description of the interior of Canterbury Cathedral was subsequently used by puritan iconoclasts as a guide to what they needed to destroy: p. 185.) Intriguingly, Parry—a professor of English

Literature, and author of a fine study of early Stuart masques—speculates that, ‘there are strong suggestions that Laudianism was moving towards the reintroduction of sacred drama, with the Chapel Royal in the 1630s as the place where words and music were combining with increasing dramatic effect’ (p. 159). No wonder puritans reserved particular ire for the vigorous bodily gestures Parry repeatedly cites as a manifestation of High Church ‘ceremonious’ worship (for example on pp. 39, 114, 142–5).

In terms of secondary literature, Parry oscillates between considerable deference towards particular authors—for instance to Nicholas Tyacke and Peter McCullough—and silence about the work of others, notably Alexandra Walsham, Christopher Haigh, and Ken Fincham. Ian Atherton’s monograph about Viscount Scudamore is used, but not his article on Scudamore’s religion; Anthony Milton’s essay on the Chapel Royal is noted, but no links are drawn to his *Catholic and Reformed*. Parry’s canvas is admirably broad, but ultimately the depth of coverage does suffer, and prevents several really key issues being addressed. How popular was the beautification of churches? It is not enough to describe one list of benefactors to the renovation of one London church and then write, ‘one is persuaded that the level of material support for the church has returned to pre-Reformation levels, under the influence of the movement to restore God’s holy places to their ancient dignity’ (p. 35). Did the Laudian arts appeal to distinctive social groups and/or inhabitants of particular geographical areas? Where could the line between acceptable and unacceptable religious images really be drawn? It is intriguing to find a Calvinist knight in Cornwall—Sir Richard Robartes—decorating his house’s long gallery with Old Testament scenes illustrating the principle of election (p. 92). Without answers to these and other questions, Parry’s conclusion that, ‘Resentment against the Laudian innovations (and against the officiousness with which they were often enforced) led many Englishmen to side with Parliament against the king’ (p. 190) seems rather bland. Certainly for the purposes of defining the period of Laudian activity, Parry might tease out the significance of Parliament’s repeated mention in 1643 of church affairs ‘within 20 years past’ (p. 188). Indeed, no mention is ever made in this book of parliamentary comments in the first years of Charles I’s reign critical of Laudian innovations.

Returning to where we began, there would nonetheless be much in this book for Hugh Trevor-Roper to relish. The dust-jacket illustration features the interior of Peterhouse chapel, the college that Trevor-Roper was such a controversial master of, and of which he offered the celebrated index entry, ‘Peterhouse: main source of perverts’ [sic converts, i.e. to Rome] (*Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans*, p. 302). More particularly, he would also have been delighted to know that one of the officious orders posted in the inner chapel during John Cosin’s period of ultra-sacramentalist worship read: ‘noe yawning’ (p. 79).

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/589#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3990>

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