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Defining the Jacobean Church

The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603-1625

Charles W. A. Prior

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Defining the Jacobean Church

This book proposes a new model for understanding religious debates in the churches of England and Scotland between 1603 and 1625. Setting aside 'narrow' analyses of conflict over predestination, its theme is ecclesiology – the nature of the Church, its rites and governance, and its relationship to the early Stuart political world. Drawing on a substantial number of polemical works, from sermons to books of several hundred pages, it argues that rival interpretations of scripture, pagan and civil history, and the sources central to the Christian historical tradition lay at the heart of disputes between proponents of contrasting ecclesiological visions. Some saw the Church as a blend of spiritual and political elements – a state church – while others insisted that the life of the spirit should be free from civil authority. As the reign went on these positions hardened and they made a major contribution to the religious divisions of the 1640s.

CHARLES W. A. PRIOR is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of History at the University of Cambridge. He is the editor of *Mandeville and Augustan ideas: new essays* (2000).

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CHARLES W. A. PRIOR
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NOTE ON THE TEXT

The dates in the text take the year to have begun on 1 January, although in all cases I have given the date of published works as it appears on the title page. I have followed the *ESTC* where attributions needed to be made, and the Bodleian Library *Pre-1920 catalogue of printed books* in cases where the *ESTC* was silent. Unless otherwise noted, biographical information is taken from the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*. I have not supplied biographical details for the writers mentioned in this study, since this information is now easily available in the *ODNB*, and in the thesis from which the present book is derived.¹ Quotations retain original spelling and punctuation. Long omissions and emendations are signalled by square brackets, while shorter omissions are signalled by ellipses.

Throughout, *conformist* is used to indicate those who sought to defend the Church from either Catholic or Protestant critics. I have not found it either useful or strictly helpful to provide, as others have, a further division of this category, whether *moderate* or *avant garde*, nor have I written of either *moderate* or *radical* critics of the Church. Instead, those who were obviously critical are referred to as *reformists*. This was a term widely enough used by writers such as Henoch Clapham, who said of a contemporary that: ‘He differs much from the most of our Reformists here at home.’² In addition, *reformist* comes the closest to summing up the ecclesiological position of the various writers to whom I have attached the term – the reform, but not the disestablishment of the Church. The word *dissenter(s)* does figure in the literature, but given the associations attached to the term by students of Restoration ecclesiology, I have chosen not to use it. I have, however, employed the term *non-conformity* in cases where the policies and

¹ Charles W. A. Prior, ‘The regiment of the Church: doctrine, discipline and history in Jacobean ecclesiology, 1603–1625’ (Ph.D. diss., Queen’s University at Kingston, 2003).

² Henoch Clapham, *Error on the left hand, through a frozen securitie* (London, 1608).

punishments associated with Jacobean conformity are under discussion.³ In no case do I employ the word *puritan*, and I have set out my reasons for not doing so in the appropriate place.⁴ While the term *Anglican* does occur in the contemporary literature, it has subsequently acquired a particular meaning that Jacobean writers did not intend, and hence does not appear here.⁵ *Doctrine* is used in the contemporary sense – the liturgical and scriptural position of the Church – while *discipline* refers to the means – subscription, episcopal visitation, deprivation – by which conformity was enforced; this too was the contemporary understanding of the term.

³ Here I follow Kenneth Fincham, *Prelate as pastor: the episcopate of James I* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴ For a contemporary treatment, see [Thomas Scott], *The interpreter wherein three principall termes of state much mistaken by the vulgar are clearly unfolded* ([Edinburgh?], 1622).

⁵ David Calderwood, *A solution of Doctor Resolutus, his resolutions for kneeling* ([Amsterdam, 1619]), p. 19.

Introduction: defining the Church

ECCLESIOLOGY AND HISTORY

In 1699, Gilbert Burnet, then Bishop of Salisbury, published *An exposition of the Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England*. The work purported to trace the roots of the English confession from the Reformation forward, and in the preface Burnet lamented that a quarrel over ceremonies and worship, ‘and about things that were of their own nature indifferent’, had been raging for ‘above an Hundred Years’. Burnet certainly knew his subject, having been guided through Elizabethan controversies by Andrew Maunsell’s bibliography, and by reading widely in the controversial literature published during the reigns of the early Stuarts.¹ This literature gave him a sense that the general tone and quality of the debate had shifted as the Elizabethan period gave way to the controversies over clerical subscription and ceremonial practice in the early years of James VI and I:

Our divines were much diverted in the end of that Reign from better Enquiries, by the *Disciplinarian Controversies*; and though what *Whitgift* and *Hooker* writ on those Heads, was much better than all that came after them; yet they neither satisfied those against whom they writ, nor stopt the Writings of their own side. But as Waters gush in, when the Banks are once broken, so the breach that these had made, proved fruitful. Parties were formed, Secular Interests were grafted upon them, and new Quarrels followed those that first begun the Dispute.²

It turns out that Burnet was largely right. The religious controversies of the Jacobean age were indeed carried on by lesser lights than Whitgift and Hooker, and as the reign went along we find evidence not only that positions began to harden on matters of doctrine and discipline, but also that these positions had implications for politics. Yet it is also the case that Jacobean controversies took place on a broad scope, which saw the traffic

¹ Andrew Maunsell, *The first part of the catalogue of English printed bookes* (London, 1595).

² Gilbert Burnet, *An exposition of the Thirty-nine articles of the Church of England* (London, 1699), pp. iii, x.

in ideas move beyond massive treatises governed by the strictures of formal controversy – this was the age of the pamphlet, and the genre expanded in the period that this book surveys.³ Burnet's reference to gushing water and broken banks reveals the impact of the expansion of print on the process of religious polemic. The premise that justifies the present study, therefore, is the existence of a large body of sources whose contribution to and role in ecclesiological debates has not been fully explored. Burnet's accurate but austere assessment of the Jacobean controversial scene deserves to be revisited.

This book is about religious controversies among English Protestants in the reign of James VI and I. It seeks to address, in part, J. C. D. Clark's call for a 'theoretically articulate history of the Church of England, including its ecclesiology, ecclesiastical polity, and political theory'.⁴ Contemporaries regarded these themes as being closely linked, and used phrases like the 'regiment of the Church' or the 'definition of the Church' to refer to a process of deliberation between defenders of the Church and their critics.⁵ Regardless of their position on aspects of doctrine and discipline, writers conceived of the English Church as partaking in the history of early Christianity; these perceptions shaped arguments concerning its doctrine and governance, as well as the political implications that attended its status

³ Three genres of religious print have been well studied: sermons, devotional literature, and 'popular print'. For sermons, see Lori Anne Ferrell, *Government by polemic: James I, the King's preachers, and the rhetorics of conformity, 1603–25* (Stanford, 1998); Peter McCullough, *Sermons at court: politics and religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean preaching* (Cambridge, 1998); Mary Morrissey, 'Interdisciplinarity and the study of early modern sermons', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 1111–23. For devotional literature, see Ian Green's studies: *The Christian's ABC: catechisms and catechizing in England c. 1530–1740* (Oxford, 1986), and *Print and Protestantism in early modern England* (Oxford, 2000). For 'popular' literature, see Tessa Watt, *Cheap print and popular piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991). For an interesting treatment of a range of cheap print and seventeenth-century religious culture, see Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's lewd hat: Protestants, Papists & players in post-Reformation England* (New Haven, 2002). For consumption and readership, see Margaret Spufford, *Small books and pleasant histories: popular fiction and its readership in seventeenth-century England* (London, 1981); Kevin Sharpe, *Sir Robert Cotton, 1586–1631: history and politics in early modern England* (Oxford, 1979); and, more recently, Kevin Sharpe, 'Re-writing Sir Robert Cotton: politics and history in early Stuart England', in his *Remapping early modern England: the culture of seventeenth-century politics* (Cambridge, 2000), pp.294–341, and *Reading revolutions: the politics of reading in early modern England* (New Haven, 2000). For a summary of the field, see R. C. Richardson, 'History and the early modern communications circuit', *Clio*, 31 (2002), 167–77. With respect to the history of print, while collection and reading are well studied, the production of books has been largely overlooked. Joad Raymond's fascinating study of pamphlets addresses this lack, and is a valuable contribution to the study of a fourth and crucial genre of early modern print. See his, *Pamphlets and pamphleteering in early modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), chs. 1, 3.

⁴ J. C. D. Clark, 'Protestantism, nationalism and national identity, 1660–1832', *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), 249–76, at 272.

⁵ Henry Jacob, *The divine beginning and institution of Christs true visible or ministeriall church* (Leiden, 1610), sig. B^{2v}.

as a visible church 'of the realm'. Many works published during the period addressed this theme: Richard Field's *Of the Church*, and Josias Nichols' *Abrahams faith* are typical of the conformist and reformist branches of the literature. Common to all was an interest in how the doctrine, discipline, and governance of the Apostolic church could be carried forth and established in post-Reformation England. In fact, a debate on ecclesiology formed a central theme in pamphlets, sermons, and longer works by writers both famous and unknown.

The context for the debates to be examined here was the introduction of new ecclesiastical Canons in 1604, and the subsequent deprivation of some eighty-five ministers who refused to 'subscribe to' – that is, to affirm by swearing an oath – the directives concerning doctrine and governance contained in them. Similarly, the Perth Articles, which set forth kneeling at communion as part of the 'official' ceremonial practice of the Kirk of Scotland, led to debates between Presbyterians and conformists, and to a deepening of religious tensions in the two kingdoms. In both settings, the introduction of new Canons served as the impetus for a series of debates on ecclesiastical sovereignty, ceremonies, episcopacy, the common law, and the patristic heritage of the Apostolic church. These debates and the literature in which they are preserved help to clarify the political, theological, and historical elements of religious controversy, and are therefore a crucial source for understanding the nature of Jacobean religious conflict.

Since English Protestant thought was based on elements derived from sacred and historical sources, it was inevitable that religious conflict would occur along similar lines. Controversial literature, first examined in studies by Roland Usher and Stuart Barton Babbage, has since become peripheral to the interests of those who study early Stuart religion.⁶ This is unfortunate, because the literature of religious controversy sheds important light on the issues and arguments that divided Protestants in the reign of James VI and I, and also points to divisions that would persist into the reign of his successor. One premise of this book is that Jacobean ecclesiology did not consist of pure theology: in both the Henrician and Elizabethan settlements defenders of the Church argued that it was 'dually established', a partly spiritual and partly temporal association that had its being in the Word and in the world. The debates that this book surveys reveal tensions within this blend of spiritual and political elements, and these tensions help us to discern contrasting approaches to ecclesiology and church polity in the writings of those controversialists who participated in printed polemical exchanges. It becomes apparent that writers on both sides were struggling to come to terms with

⁶ See R. G. Usher, *The reconstruction of the English Church*, 2 vols. (London, 1910); Stuart Barton Babbage, *Puritanism and Richard Bancroft* (London, 1962).

both the nature of early Christian history and their own place within it, for the institution of the Christian Church in which they all claimed communion was distinguished by a contested history and hence the business of religious polemic was always firmly rooted within a vast and complex historiographical tradition. Where writers divided was on the interpretation of that tradition and its implications for post-Reformation ecclesiology.⁷ The debates that this book examines were based upon distinct views of the Church's past, which in turn shaped positions on how it should be ordered and governed, as well as the 'language' in which the dispute was carried on.⁸ It was a language suited to the examination of the nature of an institution through time, and it served to legitimise aspects of the Church by locating them in the past, or to criticise them by searching into the past to discover alternative modes of doctrine and discipline. This search proceeded in the course of debate, and as time goes on one becomes aware of the development of at least two Protestant historiographical traditions, each with its canon of writers, and each putting forth an argument for how the Church should be ordered and governed.

For example, conformists argued that the English Church was both a spiritual and a political association: a state church founded on a mingling of doctrine and law, and hence able to enjoin conformity among its members.⁹ It was also a 'true' and 'ancient' church, not separated from the institution founded by Christ – the church described in the letters of the Apostles, and in the works of the Fathers of the Christian historical tradition. In short, it was a reformed continuation of the Apostolic church, which retained ceremonial practices and episcopal governance, and reserved the right to interpret 'custom' and to establish elements of worship that it deemed 'comely' and 'edifying'. The concept of *adiaphora* – which defined aspects of worship that were essential to salvation as against those that were not – lay at the core of the conformist programme, and on this basis conformists justified the ceremonialism and episcopal governance of the English Church. Disputes over these propositions were central to debates about many aspects of ecclesiology. In defending the Church against their Protestant critics, therefore, conformist controversialists sought to establish

⁷ See Arthur Ferguson, *Clio unbound: perception of the social and cultural past in Renaissance England* (Durham, NC, 1979).

⁸ For the concept of languages, see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Languages and their implications: the transformation of the study of political thought', in *Politics, language and time* (New York, 1971), pp. 3–41, and his, 'The concept of language and the *métier d'historien*: some considerations on practice', in *The languages of political theory in early modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 19–38.

⁹ Elsewhere, I have traced these issues into the eighteenth century. See Charles W. A. Prior, "'Then Leave Complaints': Mandeville, anti-Catholicism, and English orthodoxy', in *Mandeville and Augustan ideas: new essays*, ed. Charles W. A. Prior, English Literary Studies Monograph Series, 83 (Victoria, BC, 2000), pp. 51–70.