
Defining the Jacobean Church is a considerable addition to the flourishing literature on the early Stuart Church, for it offers a new angle on the current debate about the causes of division, shifting the bias away from theological disagreements to questions of ecclesiastical government. Recent writing about religious ideology in early Stuart England has tended to emphasise the theological conflict between Calvinism and Arminianism as the main cause of division in the Church, with prominent arguments over predestination and the role of the sacraments, but Charles Prior maintains that the chief concerns of most clerics who engaged in religious controversy were not those relating to ways of salvation, but issues of governance, rites and liturgy that arose from the sovereignty exercised by the Crown over the Church. A formidable body of writing about the ideal condition of the Church was published, but as Anthony Milton remarked in his important book Catholic and Reformed (1995), “the greater proportion of printed religious literature of the period 1600-40 remains almost wholly unstudied, and much historiographical debate has focused on a tiny sample of surviving material.” Prior has made some inroads into this terra incognita and encountered a number of little-known clerics “who, like Salamanders, lived in the fire of controversy.” Their disputes were always on the same overlapping topics: What are the historical evidences for the practices of reformed Protestants? Can precedents be found in the Gospels, in the letters of the Apostles, in the worship of the early Church, in the statements of the Fathers? Do Old Testament models of government by kings, priests and judges still have a prescriptive force in a modern ecclesiastical polity? What arguments can be advanced for the superiority of episcopal rule over presbyterian rule? How far is it permissible for the secular authority to assert itself in religious matters? Since the supreme governor of the Church of England was the monarch, religious questions always had political implications. The monarch wanted uniformity of belief and practice in order to maintain political stability and minimize opportunities for popular discontent, yet private conscience could prove stronger than the law in these matters, and no official pronouncements could ever produce a broad consensus.
King James did his best to settle the affairs of the Church of England by convening a conference at Hampton Court less than a year after his accession. He summoned the bishops and the leaders of the Puritans to consider demands and petitions for the further reform of the doctrine and discipline of the Church. The Puritans were frustrated in their hopes, for the Canons of 1604, which were the principal doctrinal outcome of the conference and which were drawn up under the control of Bishop Richard Bancroft, affirmed the concept of a Church in which matters of governance, doctrine and worship were subject to the political control of the Crown and Parliament. Ministers of the Church were obliged to subscribe to these Canons, along with the articles of faith. The Canons gave a focus to arguments that had been running since the Marprelate controversies of the 1580s and provoked further controversies which would shake the ecclesiastical scene for the whole of James's reign, continuing with increasing bitterness and divisiveness until the outbreak of civil war. Defining the nature of the Church was the central issue. Was it a divinely ordained institution shaped by scriptural example, independent of secular authority, guided by godly ministers, or was it a hierarchical system governed by bishops in which the practices were determined by a mixture of tradition and political expediency?

The figures that Prior leads out of obscurity bring learning, passion and prejudice to their cause in equal measure. Conformists, who supported the establishment position, refuted Reformists, who wanted change and freedom from secular control, and who in turn confuted their opponents by exposing the unsatisfactory compromise that was Hooker’s via media and Herbert’s Church of “fine aspect and fit array.”

The High Commission, a prerogative court which could administer punishments independently of the common law, and which was an instrument for the enforcement of conformity, was a particular target of the Reformists. It was an ecclesiastical mantrap. John Burges, a nonconformist Lincolnshire minister who preached before James in July 1604 and used the occasion to attack the ceremonies enjoined by the Canons of 1604, was promptly deprived of his living and imprisoned, thanks to the High Commission. Ceremonies were the site of ceaseless contention in this period, with the justifications for and against constantly rehearsed. The Old Testament was at odds with the New on this question, for the OT was rich in ceremonies, and the
NT sparse. Did Christ make ceremonies redundant, or did they remain part of the usable tradition of the Church?

The 1604 Canons upheld ceremonies, but that did not put an end to disputes. Take kneeling to receive communion, for example. The Canons enjoined kneeling, but some ministers objected that kneeling was a tradition inherited from the Church of Rome; the Gospels state that Christ sat with his disciples at the Last Supper, and so communion should be received in a sitting position. Historically acute scholars pointed out that it was customary to recline at dinner at the time of Christ, and Josephus had indicated that the ancient Jews took their meals in a recumbent position. Others argued for standing, leaning or walking; all had some precedent or justification. Conformists maintained that the Catholic tradition of kneeling had become idolatrous by paying homage to the altar or to the Eucharist, but it could be reformed by a recognition that kneeling showed reverence to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The governors of the Jacobean Church wanted conformity, but in crucial matters of conscience such as how to receive communion, they were up against resolute resistance from many ministers and laymen who had good reasons to protest. Similar arguments went on about the use of the cross in baptism, or the wearing of surplices. Were these matters indifferent, adiaphora, about which every Church was entitled to make non-prescriptive decisions according to fitness, decency, or custom, or were they matters central to faith which had to be precisely determined and enforced?

Always the debates came back to the question of governance. The Jacobean Church sought to define itself by means of its Prayer Book, its articles and canons, and by the pronouncements of its bishops and most articulate clergymen, who were intent on refining the Elizabethan reconstruction so that it could establish itself confidently as a national Church of a unique kind, preserving what were considered to be the essential doctrines of Christian faith expressed in practices that were broadly acceptable to the English people, practices that acknowledged the modifying effects of time and tradition on ancient beliefs. It incorporated the monarch for its political protection, because its existence aroused the enmity of foreign nations, yet the monarch needed its support for the stable ordering of the country. Such a Church was indeed a peculiar institution, and it needed exceptional ingenuity, learning and even casuistry for its vindication and defence. It had to be defended against
Catholics and vindicated to Reformist Protestants, who had as much learning and even more passion than the establishment men. The illuminating illustration of the debates between exponents of differing Protestant convictions is the achievement of Prior’s book. He captures the vigour of the antagonists, and we acquire a vivid understanding of the scale, complexity, intensity and duration of these debates. Prior makes us listen to many new and unfamiliar voices, such as those of Thomas Bell, William Bradshaw, Samuel Hieron, William Covell, John Gordon—though it would be helpful to have more information about the background of these men, their education and affiliations—and we come to realise that many of the debates that destabilised the Church in the reign of King Charles had been running for decades. There was a large audience and no shortage of participants—and no acceptable solutions, apart from the separation of the discontented from the state Church.

In his last chapter, Prior enlarges his scope to consider how King James attempted to exert control over the Presbyterian Kirk of his native Scotland. We have heard much in recent years about King Charles’s disastrous efforts to impose uniformity of governance and worship on Scotland, so Prior’s account of James’s tentative moves in this direction, and the furious reactions in print they aroused, is an especially helpful preview to the even more violent dissensions of the 1630s which finally pushed religious conflict into war.


This collection of thirteen essays—which sprang out of a conference organized by the Center of Early Modern History at the University of Minnesota—brings together views of American, British, and Dutch historians on early modern religious reforms and dissent across the European and Asian continents. The selection of essays represents several new approaches to the Protestant Reformation in modern-day historiography: namely, that it was not a rapid process carried out by the state, but rather a gradual process shaped to a large extent by common people; that religious beliefs and tensions contributed greatly to the formation of early modern group identities, par-