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).
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.


5 Henry Jacob, The divine beginning and institution of Christ’s true visible or ministeriall church (Leiden, 1610), sig. B3v.
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. 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

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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. 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. 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. 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

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a sound historical pedigree for doctrine and discipline, and to employ this interpretation to justify ceremonies and governance in the national Church. In doing so, they looked to the record of early Christianity in search of historical precedents, and bolstered these where necessary with testimony from patristic sources and even civil and pagan histories of the Roman and post-Roman polities. The burden of the conformist position, evident in the work of Hooker and many of those who succeeded him, was to establish a usable account of the mingling of sacred and human history, and therefore the mingling of sacred and human authority.

Those Protestants who sought further reformation of the Church grounded their arguments on alternate versions of the history of Christianity, some emphasising Presbyterian government within an established church, and others calling for gathered congregations of free Christians governed by their own ‘consent’. They argued that the liturgy, rites, and governance of the Church had to derive from the *iure divino* authority of scripture, and receive confirmation from the sound and uncorrupted testimony of ecclesiastical historians, the Fathers, and contemporary reformed divines. The visible church had to emulate the precepts of true doctrine, and this premise shaped a range of ecclesiastical positions from ceremonial practice to governance and discipline. Reformists looked to history in order to discover the point at which the church existed in its purest form, and treated the advent of the Roman church as the beginning of a decline. It was through this lens that they scrutinised the Church of England, arguing that it had not proceeded far enough along the path of reform. From a doctrinal point of view, they argued that ceremonialism and governance by bishops had no pedigree either in scripture or in what the testimony of Christian authorities indicated about the worship and governance of the ancient church. These arguments were based upon painstaking scriptural exegesis, and backed up by a great variety of other theological texts; the use of scholastic methods was not limited to conformists, and William Prynne’s catalogue of ‘testimonies’ exemplifies an abiding interest among reformists in the study of ancient and reformed sources. 10

There were political implications to these ecclesiastical arguments. Conformists emphasised the visible institution of the Church that blended essential and indifferent elements of doctrine, and argued that since the Church was in some sense domiciled within the channels of civil authority, the uniformity of its public doctrine would be maintained by civil measures. This led them to link episcopal government with political stability, and therefore to condemn Presbyterian discipline as a threat to the sovereignty

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10 William Prynne, *A catalogue of such testimonies in all ages as plainly evidence bishops and presbyters to be both one, equall and the same in jurisdiction, office, dignity, order, and degree* ([Leiden?], 1637).
of the Crown. By contrast, reformists sought to defend the continuity of a doctrinally ‘pure’ church over which the Word was sovereign; with respect to human involvement in the Church, they insisted that since the locus of ecclesiastical authority lay with the Crown in parliament, these bodies were charged with the promotion of true doctrine, and hence true governance and ceremonial practice. Yet they also put forth political arguments against the established Church, most notably by suggesting that the deprivation of non-conformist ministers violated the common law and the sovereignty of parliament. Scots writers went a step further, and suggested that the imposition of English worship and governance on the Kirk was both doctrinally indefensible and an assault on the legal and national independence of the Scottish confession. In all cases, a distinct vision of church polity was underpinned by assumptions about the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical authority. Hence, the broad theme that this book seeks to trace is how polemical debates on a range of ecclesiological issues and involving a wide sample of writers led to the development of narratives that sought to strike a balance between civil and ecclesiastical authority. Defining the Church was no easy task, and the question accounted for a profound division among Protestant writers in both the English and Scottish settings, which in turn reveals the first stirrings of the religious conflicts that would emerge in the reign of Charles I.

MODELS OF JACOBEAN PROTESTANT CONFLICT

Polemical debates on ecclesiology and history have haunted the edges of scholarship on early Stuart religion, but have remained largely unstudied. This is despite the fact that a number of direct references to the theme have been made, often by those central to the broad scholarly debate on the nature of religious conflict in early Stuart England. In the late 1980s Peter Lake observed that disagreement about the visible church ‘was arguably the crucial divide in English Protestant opinion during this period’. Since then, Lake’s work on Stephen Denison and the struggle among London’s godly community in the years before the Civil War has supplied a powerful lesson on the importance of polemical sources for our understanding of disputes within English Protestantism. Similarly,

11 Roland Usher correctly identified the principal source of tension inherent in the Jacobean settlement: ‘The ultimate object in 1603 was, as before, unity of belief and observance, but it was now to be attained by making the church strong as an institution.’ See Usher, The reconstruction of the English Church, vol. I, p. 6.

12 Peter Lake, ‘Calvinism and the English Church, 1570–1635’, Past and Present, 114 (1987), 32–76, at 39. The importance of Lake’s message may have been lost in the controversy over Arminianism that dominated the pages of Past and Present.

Conrad Russell has observed that religious conflict resembled ‘a custody battle’ for control of the Church. Yet, where others have described this contest as one waged between ‘Anglicans’ and ‘puritans’, Russell suggested that a sounder approach was to assess the positions of ‘rival claimants to the title of orthodox, and therefore between rival criteria of orthodoxy’. J. G. A. Pocock pursued this theme in essays on the nature of ‘English orthodoxy’ and its relation to politics. The Reformation settlement opened up a tension between an invisible association and the Crown that claimed an admixture of spiritual and secular power over it. Owing to this uneasy balance between spirituals and temporals, neither of which was confined to its own sphere, the history of the Church was dominated by episodes of disruption.

The chapters that follow offer a new interpretation of this disruption in the Jacobean Church, and point to its continuation in early Stuart religious thought. At the heart of the argument is the suggestion that the custody battle over the nature of ‘orthodoxy’ was more complex than has thus far been shown. However, ‘orthodoxy’ was not a word that Jacobean writers used with sufficient frequency or consistency to justify its adoption in a study of their theological attitudes. This instability of categories explains why a search for useful terms to describe parties to the dispute has occupied historians of religion since S. R. Gardiner threw down the ‘puritan’ gauntlet.

In writing of ‘conformists’ and ‘reformists’, I mean simply to point to a tension between two broad groups, one of which was satisfied with the Church as it stood, and the other anxious to put forth detailed reasons for

17 See T. R. Clancy, ‘Papist-Protestant-Puritan: English religious taxonomy, 1565–1665’, Recusant History, 13 (1973–6), 227–53. As was mentioned in ‘note on the text’, the term ‘puritan’ has been strenuously avoided in this book. The historiographical scuffle over the term ‘puritan’ seems to have done little to diminish its place in the conceptual toolbox of the historian of religion, and so the Elizabethan Church as the site of the ‘puritan ethos’ is now a well-established scholarly convention. Yet ‘puritan’ has come to mean a group possessed of a shared religious experience, which in turn was transformed into a revolutionary ideology; after all, one could not have the ‘Puritan revolution’ without ‘puritans’, and the term has had the unfortunate consequence of eliding the ideas and actions of two groups of people separated by nearly eighty years. See Paul Christianson, ‘Reformers and the Church of England under Elizabeth and the early Stuarts’, Journal of Ecclesiastical History, 31 (October 1980), 463–82, and the response by Patrick Collinson, ‘A comment: Concerning the name Puritan’, 483–8, in the same volume. Like ‘puritanism’, the ‘Puritan revolution’ has consumed a good deal of paper and ink. For a synthesis, see Michael Finlayson, Historians, puritans and the English Revolution (Toronto, 1983).
why it should be reformed. It must be stressed that these groups were not uniform as to the specific elements of their case, and that I do not intend to replace one set of binary categories with another. For example, there were variations among conformist defenders of episcopacy: some argued that the office was Apostolic and independent of the Crown, while others regarded bishops in legal and constitutional terms, as ‘inferior magistrates’. Further, while their positions may have clashed, writers on both sides of the issue were, on the whole, members of the same theological and intellectual elite, schooled in theology and history at either Oxford or Cambridge, and occupying positions in the English Church, from preachers to bishops; with a few exceptions, all the writers discussed were churchmen when James VI assumed the English throne. This would seem to confirm the aptness of Russell’s suggestion that debates between them were part of a contest for control of one Church, and it is this premise that guides the present work.

This book seeks to situate itself within an emerging trend among scholars of early Stuart religion that rejects a ‘narrow’ interpretation of religious conflict dominated by predestination, Arminianism, and the attack on Calvinist soteriology. The principal focus of scholarly debate has been Nicholas Tyacke’s discussion of soteriology and its role in the religious and political conflicts of early Stuart England. Rather than the visible church or problems of conformity, Tyacke focussed on doctrinal debates, on University curricula in divinity, and on evidence of popular attachment to Calvinist teaching on salvation. This led him to suggest that ‘by the end of the sixteenth century the church of England was largely Calvinist in doctrine’, and that Calvinism ‘remained dominant in England throughout the first two decades of the seventeenth century’. Since the doctrinal posture of the English Church was defined predominately by Calvinism, the argument ran, its disruption would result from challenges to this doctrinal ‘consensus’. Tyacke’s Anti-Calvinists was published in 1987, but elements of the thesis were already well established, and remain at the centre of the ‘revisionist’ interpretation of political and religious conflict before the English Civil War. As early as

18 Again, see my ‘note on the text’ for an explanation of these terms, and a justification for their use.


1973, Tyacke sought to challenge the explanatory model of the ‘Puritan revolution’ with what he termed the ‘rise of Arminianism’; this doctrine set aside the Calvinist notion of predestination and stressed salvation by works, and Tyacke argued that it signalled the erosion of a Calvinist ‘consensus’ after 1620.21 The connection with political life lay in a coterie of Arminian bishops, among them William Laud, who came to enjoy the support of Charles I. This and other issues contributed to the alienation of the House of Commons and a deepening polarisation over the Church, the nature of monarchical rule, and the sovereignty of parliament.22

Given the historiographical terrain – the advent of revisionism and the subsequent controversy over the ‘origins’ of the English Civil War – it was no surprise that Tyacke’s thesis came under attack from historians of religion.23 In a 1983 article, Peter White challenged Tyacke’s contention that there was a sudden ‘rise’ of Arminianism, contended that some measure of debate on the issue could be found in the Elizabethan setting, and denied the presence of a ‘doctrinal high road to civil war’.24 In the following years the pages of Past and Present were the site of a series of exchanges between White and Tyacke, and a number of other articles on the issue by scholars such as William Lamont and Peter Lake.25 Despite this criticism, Tyacke held fast to his argument that the rise of Arminianism after 1620 supplanted Calvinist ‘egalitarianism’ with a notion of a church and state conceived in ‘hierarchical’ terms, and that herein lay the challenge to the Calvinist ‘world picture’.26 Anti-Calvinists also met with vigorous criticism from G. W. Bernard, who argued that Tyacke had based his analysis upon a poorly developed account of what the English Reformation meant for politics. Bernard therefore stressed the point that any discussion of post-Reformation religion had to be set in the context of a
‘monarchical’ Church, wherein the Crown exercised sovereignty in the interest of preventing religious conflict. 27 Finally, Peter White’s full-length study of predestination from the Reformation to the Civil War reprised the argument of his earlier article; that is, that Calvinism and Arminianism were not clearly defined positions set one against the other, but rather that there existed a ‘spectrum’ of belief on the doctrine of predestination. 28

This study suggests that critics of the Tyacke thesis have not yet provided the definitive case against it, particularly as it applies to the Jacobean Church. 29 Central to Tyacke’s case was the proposition that a Calvinist consensus is what defined the post-Reformation Church, when there is a stronger case to be made for a deeply rooted conflict on the very nature of the visible church itself. This is not to say that the conflict traced by Tyacke is irrelevant – certainly different opinions on the way to salvation entailed different visions of the Church – but rather, the debate over subscription suggests a more broadly based conflict than that described in Anti-Calvinists. 30 The debates in question probed a range of topics, from the ecclesiastical sovereignty of the Crown in parliament, the tension between episcopal power and the common law, and the problem of religion in the three kingdoms – the very conflicts that dominated the pamphlet literature of the 1640s. 31 In short, English ‘ecclesiastical polity’ (as contemporaries called it) was knitted together in a manner whose complexity is not adequately captured by the notion of a Calvinist consensus. In a society where the union of Church and state was a matter of constitutional precept, religious conflict did not turn on the question of doctrine alone, but on the nature of the visible institution in which that doctrine was professed and the links between this institution and other elements of the Tudor and early Stuart political complex. This was the point that Bernard sought to make; however, there is reason to believe that it was overstated. As we shall see, the English Church did reflect a strong monarchical component, but just how it was to be used in the service of religion was a source of great tension. In other words, Bernard

28 Peter White, Predestination, policy, and polemic: conflict and consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War (Cambridge, 1992), p. xiii.  
30 Indeed, Tyacke’s critics have tended to overlook the fact that he purported to examine ‘a particular thread running through the often labyrinthine religious history of the period’. Anti-Calvinists, p. xiv.  
31 While Conrad Russell is aware of all of these tensions, his preference has been to side with Tyacke’s view that a central plank in English ‘orthodoxy’ was doctrinal Calvinism, and that the attack on this orthodoxy presaged the Civil War; as Russell put it, ‘Charles’s abandonment of Calvinist doctrine removed the coping-stone from this edifice.’ See Causes of the English Civil War, pp. 51–2.