

ANTI-ARMINIANS: THE ANGLICAN REFORMED TRADITION FROM CHARLES II TO GEORGE I

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Some historians have described the period after 1662 as ‘the eclipse of Calvinism’, as if Reformed theology had been entirely and irrevocably overthrown within Anglicanism at the Restoration. Even some evangelical churchmen have recently been heard to argue against what they pejoratively term ‘Calvinism’ on the basis that such theology was decisively rejected by the Church of England in the seventeenth century. This clear, engaging, and erudite study by Stephen Hampton, the Dean of Peterhouse in Cambridge, seeks to revise that inaccurate picture, and to show that despite some severe setbacks, Reformed Anglicanism remained a vibrant and viable force in the time between the great ejection and the great awakening.

Dean Hampton sets about his task by first giving the reader an introduction to the great and the good of the Reformed Anglican world in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Notwithstanding their Reformed theological credentials, some of these men were also notable for a commitment to the neo-Laudian agenda in terms of elaborate church architecture and various high church stage props, ‘Reformed divinity, but with Restoration curlicues [ornamental twists]’ as the author puts it, a style he himself it seems is probably most comfortable with. This makes them look a somewhat peculiar and eccentric Anglican bunch within the wider international movement, but still recognisably Reformed, in certain aspects of their soteriology for example. There may be quibbles over the precise definition of what constitutes ‘Reformed’ here at times; Hampton’s definition is deliberately somewhat broad and flexible and looks for certain ‘motifs’ in each figure’s theology rather than any coherent ‘ideology’ or programme, which means more straightforward Calvinists may feel less affinity with some of these divines than with others.

One question left somewhat hanging in the air by this book is what precisely was new about the Revival of the eighteenth century if the gospel of salvation by faith alone was not unknown in the highest circles before it. The Dean helpfully points out that it was the Reformed who were the majority amongst the conforming Evangelicals at that time and it is true that men like Whitefield and Toplady acknowledged a great debt to the generation of Reformed

Anglicans highlighted here. Whilst it has been claimed that Reformed Anglicans before the Revival were a very small minority, Hampton claims that they numbered at least twelve bishops, six deans, and several senior divinity professors, not to mention several of the greatest scientific minds, one of the most celebrated preachers, two eminent Patristic scholars, and some influential ecclesiastical courtiers. This is hardly indicative of an invisible minority; indeed, it could well provoke Reformed Anglicans of the early twenty-first century to jealousy, languishing as they do without anything approaching this level of influence in the Church of England. We certainly have very few senior figures today who are competent and willing (as Hampton puts it), ‘to expound the Reformed faith as the uncontroversial norm of Anglican belief’.

The Reformed credentials of the men under this spotlight are demonstrated through an examination of various intricate debates in which they were involved. In terms of their Trinitarian orthodoxy, their view of salvation, their doctrine of justification, and their doctrine of God, they clearly arrayed themselves against insidious Socinian (unitarian) influences and perniciously prominent Arminian liberalism. The central chapters contain deft exposition of these interactions, some of which have an eerily familiar ring (such as the arguments over the precise meaning of the phrase “works of the law”, whether the active righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believer or not, whether there is a place for justification by works at the last day, and what is new about the new covenant). In each one, Reformed Anglicans were able to articulate a clear, sophisticated, and biblical response to the novel intrusions of the day. While some of the discussion here feels dense and occasionally esoteric, again, the depth of their scholarship and breadth of their reading make one long for similarly vigorous Reformed Anglican divines in our day.

This, then, is an important corrective to the relative neglect of conforming Reformed theologians amongst those who have written on this period. The great usefulness of its carefully worked through conclusions to the ‘conforming Reformed’ today is that it helpfully joins the historical dots between the Restoration (when all Calvinist influence was thought to have been expunged from the Established church) and the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century (which saw a resurgence and revitalisation of that Reformed gospel).

Minor criticisms could be levelled at parts of the book, such as the distracting

and unnecessary use of feminine pronouns to describe the generic (i.e. a person or an agent is referred to as ‘she’ or ‘her’ for no particular reason), and proof-reading is not quite up to the standard one would expect for such an expensive tome from an ancient press. However, this does not distract too much from what is otherwise an assured and elegant performance. Finally, two small caveats at this point; first, this book is far too expensive and probably not worth the investment of nearly £70 for most ministers, though every theological library worth its salt ought to have at least one copy. Oxford University Press should bring out an inexpensive paperback for us to enjoy immediately. Second, and perhaps I ought to have mentioned this to begin with, the author is now this reviewer’s doctoral supervisor, so the reader ought to feel free to discount everything positive mentioned here—unless of course you read the book for yourself and see that it really is a fascinating, insightful, and polemically useful study of a neglected part of our Church’s history.

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