

Article reprinted from *Cross†Way* Issue Spring 1996 No. 60

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

RICHARD HOOKER – Reformed Theologian of the English Church

By Nigel Atkinson

Richard Hooker (1554-1600), presbyter, preacher, Master of the Temple and Vicar of Bishopsbourne in Kent is widely recognized as the great theologian of the Church of England. It is widely accepted, by all shades of scholarly opinion that Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* mark the true beginning of what has come to be known as 'Anglicanism'. It is often argued that Hooker was the first major exponent of the 'Anglican' view and this distinctive 'Anglican' view first found coherent theological expression in the *Laws*.

But is this view of Hooker really justified? It is commonly accepted, to be sure, but we have to ask some searching questions before we accept this assessment of Hooker at face value. John Keble, the High Churchman of the Oxford Movement, was one of the first to argue that English theology underwent such a 'decisive change' in Hooker's hands that this accounts for the fact that the Church of England 'continued at such a distance from Geneva'. Now note what Keble is saying. He is declaring that Hooker, as the Church of England's greatest theologian, was formulating a novel theological position that terminated somewhere *in between* Rome on the one hand and Geneva on the other. In saying this Keble was, in effect, giving birth to the theological concept of the *via media* and you do not have to be a devout reader of the General Synod's *Reports of Proceedings*, or of the myriad Reports, Memoranda, and Agreements that pour off the presses to be aware of the fact that this concept of the 'Anglican' *via media* pervades almost every facet of Church life. This is a great shame for it carries with it the implicit assumption that whatever Hooker was and whatever the Church of England is, neither is fully committed to the doctrinal first principles of the Reformation.¹ The fundamental theological principle at work in any concept of the *via media* is the notion that because the Church of England (and Hooker as her most representative theologian) sought a *via media* they were not in full accord with the theology of the Reformation most exemplified by Geneva. They sought to continue, as Keble argued, at 'a distance from Geneva'. This position (it is then argued) is the theological position of Hooker and because it is Hooker's position it is also the position of the Church of England. In short neither Hooker or the Church of England are wholly committed to evangelical theology.

REFORMED THEOLOGIAN?

If this is true this is a serious blow to all those who seek to uphold the doctrinal principles of the Reformation which, I suspect, would be the majority of *Cross†Way* readers. But things are not as bad as they seem for we have to ask deeper and more searching questions. If Hooker, as the theological champion of the Church of England, did not fully embrace the doctrinal first principles of Reformed orthodoxy, what were his doctrinal first principles upon which he was able to justify separation from Rome? Three responses can be given to this question. Firstly, it could be argued that Hooker's stance is made out of a theological mish mash, a syncretistic mixing of two separate and distinct theological systems, a mixture that can constantly change depending, not on theological truth, but on political expediency. Second, it could be argued that Hooker did achieve a real, coherent and theological *via media* that placed the Church of England at some remove from the Reformation and this came to be known as 'Anglicanism'. But if one accepts this, one has to spell out the doctrinal distinctives of this *via media* so that it can be seen that Hooker is not a Reformed theologian and that the Church of England is not one of the Reformed churches of Europe. The third and most likely position that can be adopted is that Hooker and the Church embraced the evangelical reformation and that as a point of fact, a Reformed position was willingly adopted in all cardinal doctrinal beliefs.

ANGLICAN THEOLOGIAN?

Notwithstanding this, however, numerous academics have tried to convince us that Hooker is the *via media* 'Anglican' theologian par excellence. But this raises further questions. First of all it is anachronistic to apply the label 'Anglican' to Hooker. The term was never used by the theologians of the Church of England at the time of the Reformation and when it was first used it was used as a blanket label for all members of the Church of England with no theological discrimination taking place. The fact that they might have been either strict Elizabethan Calvinists or more liberally minded Jacobean Arminians did not alter the designation 'Anglican' from being applied to them. Just as today the label 'Anglican' can be used to describe Church Society, or Forward in Faith or the Sea of Faith movement. Thus because the term 'Anglican' is so theologically anaemic, vacuous and imprecise it is almost meaningless as a term of theological definition. This should put us on our guard on at least two fronts. Firstly, the fact that the term 'Anglican' is a term of later coinage, and was used to describe the supposedly unique doctrinal position of the Church of England, lends significant weight to the argument that, at the time, the theologians and Reformers of the Church were blissfully unaware that they were hammering out a theological position that was distinct from that being pursued by the Reformation in general. And the reason that they were so blissfully unaware was not due to theological naivety on their part but simply because they were convinced that they were not departing, in any significant way, from the high ground occupied by an explicitly Reformed position. Secondly, even if we accept the anachronistic term 'Anglican' being applied to Hooker, it gets us no further forward in terms of defining his theological stance. In which case it might as well be dropped.

In this initial article I have attempted to argue that the *via media* understanding of 'Anglicanism' that is supposedly best exemplified in Hooker is riddled with ambiguities and inconsistencies. This should come as no surprise for its fundamental 'big idea' is to try and divorce Hooker and the Church of England from the Reformation and to cast the Church into a less than consistent evangelical position. In my second article I shall demonstrate how Hooker's understanding of Scripture, Tradition and Reason follows almost exactly the theological contours of the magisterial Reformers thereby claiming Hooker as loyal son of the Reformation.

The Revd Nigel Atkinson at time of writing was Warden of Latimer House and is presently Vicar of St John the Baptist, Knutsford.

Endnotes:

- 1) This is extensively argued in a book to which I am indebted. See W J Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker's Doctrine of the Royal Supremacy*, E J Brill, Leiden, 1990.