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RICHARD HOOKER – Evangelical Theologian of the English Church

By Nigel Atkinson

As you may remember in your last issue of *Cross†Way* there was a small article on Richard Hooker. In that article I pointed out that Richard Hooker is most often read as the theologian of the Church of England and that this meant that Hooker was inevitably a theologian of the *via media*, creating a doctrinal position that was unique to Anglicanism and inimical to evangelical, Calvinist orthodoxy. I pointed out, in a general way, some of the inherent difficulties and anomalies with such a position. In this article I would like to spend a little time looking at Hooker's understanding of theological authority. In other words what sort of authority should the Christian attribute to Scripture, Tradition and Reason?

As is so often maintained the Anglican 'genius' that underpins the *via media* is to appeal to Scripture, Tradition and Reason and one often receives the impression that these three sources of authority are of equal weight and power. Certainly the conclusions that some Reports arrive at seem to suggest that Reason and Tradition have as much significance as Scripture but it would be a gross misreading of Hooker to think that it was Hooker who claimed that Scripture, Tradition and Reason were of equal authority. I shall argue that Hooker's position is almost identical to the one hammered out by the magisterial Reformers in general, and Luther and Calvin in particular. I shall examine Hooker's understanding of Reason Tradition and Scripture in that order.

REASON

As is well known Hooker was directing the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* against radical Puritans who wished to 'Presebyterianise' the Church of England. According to these radical Reformers the Church of England was only but 'halfly reformed' and in order to be truly reformed according to God's word it would be safest if the Church of England closely patterned herself on Calvin's Geneva. Hooker was appalled at such a programme of action. It was not that he was against further reform if judged necessary; rather he was horrified by the unreformed position that the radical Puritans were adopting. For it seemed to Hooker that these radical Reformers were in danger of elevating a form of Church government into a first order issue. Thus Hooker, at all times, was trying to demonstrate that his theological approach was one that was most in tune with the magisterial Reformers and that it was the radical Disciplinarians (so-called due to the fact that they wished to impose Calvin's 'discipline' on the English Church).

Upon reading Hooker however, the radicals attempted to indicate Hooker's departure from Reformed orthodoxy. They argued that in Hooker's writings '*Aristotle the patriarch of Philosophers* (with divers human writers) *and the ingenuous schoolemen, almost in all points have some finger; Reason is highlie sett up against holie scripture*'. Bearing in mind the Reformers' complaint that in the study of theology the pagan philosophers, Aristotle and Plato, were regarded with more respect than Scripture it can be seen that the radicals were insinuating that Hooker was seeking to undermine the Reformation by adopting a pre-Reformation position.

As Hooker surveyed the arguments of the radical Reformers he was aware that they were gripped by the idea that in order to please God it was necessary that anything done had to be done with the specific warrant of Scripture. For Hooker such a position was absurd. For Scripture's primary task was not to provide us with all the information we need in order to live well. The prime task of Scripture was to provide us not with '*knowledge naturall*' but rather with '*supernatural knowledge*' which was impossible to obtain from the created order. Thus Scripture did not provide mankind

with the information needed on how to build houses or to plough with a team of horses. For matters of this kind it was enough that we utilised our God given common sense. But, Hooker continues, this God given common sense could stretch even further. Not only could man's mind furnish him with great insight into the workings of this world it could also point him to his need of God. Making this point Hooker draws on the pagan philosophers. Even they realised that there was a God, that he was to be worshipped and adored and that man's chief vocation in life was to serve God. But beyond this they could not go. Left with just this knowledge there would be no salvation. Hence the need for Scripture, whose primary purpose is to give us the Gospel. In taking up this position it should be obvious that Hooker was following Luther and his doctrine of the two realms or two kingdoms. As Hooker argued, it was foolish of the radical Reformers to insist that everything had to have express biblical warrant. He wrote that it is a mistake to exclude '*the benefite of nature's light, because the necessities of a diviner's light is magnified.*'

TRADITION

If this proves that Hooker was closer to the doctrinal principles of the Reformation than has previously been admitted or recognised we still need to consider Hooker's attitude to Tradition. This subject can best be approached by looking briefly at Hooker's conflict with the Puritan Reader, Walter Travers, at the Temple Church in London. The controversy grew up over what appeared to be Hooker's indulgent attitude to the Church of Rome. According to many over-zealous clergy it was dangerous for the Church of England to retain anything from her Roman past. Did the medieval Church have bishops? Then it is best to abolish them in the now reformed Church of England? Indeed Thomas Cartwright was to argue that it would be safer if the Church of England were to model herself more closely on Islam than to retain anything from the past. But if the Church of Rome was so corrupt, Hooker was to argue, could those who lived and died in the Church of Rome be saved? Unwilling to consign the whole medieval Church to hell Hooker tentatively suggested that they could be saved notwithstanding the terrible abuses then prevalent in the Church of Rome. This horrified Travers, Cartwright and others who were convinced that Hooker was going 'soft' despite the fact that Hooker regarded the papacy as Antichrist, the Beast of the Apocalypse and the 'Man of sin' of 2 Thessalonians 2! Once again Hooker was to conclude that these radical Disciplinary Reformers were overstepping the careful distinctions made by Calvin, Luther and the other magisterial Reformers.

For what is so striking in their writings is not a desire to uproot the Church from her historical moorings but rather a desire to reform the Church *back into* her original practices and beliefs. As a result there is a great preoccupation with Tradition in the writings of the Reformers. They, above all, were not seeking to depart from the universal practice of the Christian Church. On the contrary they maintained that the Church of Rome was the party guilty of precisely such behaviour by introducing all sorts of novelties. Consequently Hooker was horrified at the Puritan's insistence that to be truly reformed one had to be as *unlike* Rome as possible. For Hooker, as for Calvin and Luther it was safer to follow the practices of the universal Church provided such practices were not condemned by Scripture. As Hooker was to write the Church should not '*lightlie esteeme what hath bene allowed as fitt in the judgement of antiquitie and by the longe continewed practise of the whole Church, from which unnecessarilie to swarve experience hath never found safe.*' Once again Hooker can be seen following the theological lead provided by Calvin and Luther and rejecting the theology of the radical Reformers.

SCRIPTURE

If I am correct in my argument that Hooker was following the Reformers in his views on Reason and Tradition it should come as no surprise that he was to do the same with regard to Scripture. For the Disciplinary Reformers Scripture was to provide a blue print for the whole of life. To be sure there are many ways in which Scripture does this but it was the extent to which the radicals were prepared to push this principle that proved to be the parting of the ways. For example Thomas Cartwright

claimed that Scripture was to dictate in every area of life so that if something was not expressly commanded this was in effect an express prohibition. Thus Cartwright could argue that *'the word of God containeth the direction of all things pertaining to the church, yea, of whatsoever things fall into any part of man's life ... even so farre as to the taking up of a rush or strawe.'* However, although Hooker held to the infallibility *and* inerrancy of Scripture he felt that it was dangerous to ascribe too much authority to Scripture in those areas where God had obviously allowed men to use their common discretion and judgement. For, Hooker was to argue, just as *'incredible praises geven unto men do often abate and impaire the credit of their deserved commendation; so we must likewise take great heede, lest in attributing unto scripture more than it can have, the incredibilitie of that do cause even those thinges which indeed it hath most abundantly to be lesse reverently esteemed.'* As a consequence Hooker was able to read the Old Testament, not primarily as a divine book of law but rather as a series of books that prefigured and pointed to Christ. Thus, in Hooker's hands, the Old Testament can be read as Gospel; and it is the Gospel that is applicable to the Christian not the Mosaic legislation which has been done away in Christ.

Although what I have written is far too little to do justice to the complexity of Hooker's thought I think I can safely suggest that Hooker's use of Scripture, Tradition and Reason closely followed and approximated the approach adopted by all the major Reformers. He was not the theologian of a unique Anglican *via media*. Such a myth must be dispelled.

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