



**Charles Prior.** *Defining the Jacobean Church: The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603-1625.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiv + 294 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-511-12611-6.

**Reviewed by** Tim E. Cooper III (Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Otago, New Zealand)

**Published on** H-Albion (November, 2006)

## Conformists, Reformists and the British Civil Wars

Charles Prior has attempted “a new interpretation of ... disruption in the Jacobean Church” (p. 7), one that has implications for the upheavals that gripped the Three Kingdoms during the 1640s. The current consensus, such as it is, suggests that the main source of religious conflict leading to the wars lay in rival definitions of soteriology; that these debates were relatively new and particular to the personalities and policies of Archbishop William Laud and King Charles I; and (with much less scholarly consensus) that their efforts shattered a previously held Calvinist consensus.[1] Thus we have until now been most interested in the debates between Arminians and Calvinists. Prior suggests this focus is misplaced and myopic. He “rejects a ‘narrow’ interpretation of religious conflict dominated by predestination, Arminianism, and the attack on Calvinist soteriology” (p. 8). “Very broadly, then, this book seeks to shift the focus of our understanding of religious conflict away from Arminianism and Laudianism, and toward the problem of ecclesiology and its impact on political theory, religious debate, and historical thought” (p. 19). The most important issues were competing definitions of how the Church should be governed and how it should be aligned to the political instruments of the state. These conflicts were far from new in the 1630s. “Chance references to Arminianism aside, the dispute on ceremonies did not represent the sudden shattering of a Jacobean consensus over Calvinism; rather, it testified to the continuation of a deep-seated conflict over the doctrine and governance of the Church” (p. 201). Precisely these issues were at

play in efforts to harmonize practice in the Church of Scotland and the more dominant Church of England well before Charles and Laud came to power and influence. “Indeed, rather than a model positing disjunction after 1625, this study points to the potential for continuity of debate over fundamental issues in early Stuart ecclesiology; their significance may lie in the fact that, in 1640, these issues were still unresolved” (p. 262).

Prior’s approach is measured and thorough. The book opens with a careful outline of key definitions; they are terms aptly used. The main protagonists in this story are the conformists (“those who sought to defend the Church from either Catholic or Protestant critics”) and the reformists (“those who were obviously critical” of current understandings of the Church). The central issues are ones of doctrine (“the liturgical and scriptural position of the Church”) and discipline (“the means—subscription, episcopal visitation, deprivation—by which conformity was enforced”) (all citations from pp. xiii-xiv). Such simplicity and clarity allows Prior to reconstruct the debates with precision and detail.

It is impossible in a brief review to convey the full complexity of these debates. Suffice to say that the cluster of the most contentious issues would include episcopacy, ceremony, and clerical subscription, along with rival understandings of how royal sovereignty over the Church should operate, all backed up by richly detailed discussions of points of law, the history of the Church, and the role of Scripture. Conformists argued that Scrip-

ture had left many matters of Church governance and practice “indifferent,” and that the bishops—whose office stretched back to the early Church—were charged with ensuring order in and conformity to current Church practice, thereby helping to hold the civil polity together. “The English Church was thus defined by conformists in terms of antiquity, hierarchy, and sovereignty” (p. 52). To criticize the Church was ultimately to criticize the King himself, thus they “regarded religious non-conformity as the equivalent of sedition” (p. 31). The central tension lay in the establishment of the Church of England “as a spiritual association not separated from the church established by Christ, and as a political association established by law” (p. 64). But reformists did not press to separate the spiritual from the political. They could be “decidedly in favour of the monarchical jurisdiction over the Church, and portrayed an encroaching Episcopal jurisdiction as the real threat” (p. 95). In other words, they argued it was the Bishops who intruded on the King’s sovereignty. “The problem was that Episcopal jurisdiction struck at the sanctity of trial by jury,” in the operation of the Court of High Commission, “itself the very heart of the common law” (pp. 106-107). As much as legal issues were involved here, the key battlegrounds for these debates were the (ambiguous) history of the Church and the related role of Scripture. Reformists emphasized “the purity of the first institution [of the Church, and] regarded any departure from it as a decline” (p. 159). Therefore, “what one side defended as an indelible mark of ecclesiological sovereignty, the other condemned as a vestige of human invention, and the mark of a church tilted too far towards Rome. Reformists argued that ... any mode of governance adopted by the Church had to have a sound warrant in scripture; if it did not, then it was merely of ‘human invention’, and a political device applied to a spiritual end” (p. 114).

Prior does a fine job of describing these debates. His book is an impressive work of scholarship. It is meticulous and comprehensive in its coverage of the great amount of source material that has so far remained strangely ignored or underplayed. We now have an excellent sense of what these works contain. For that, we owe him a very great debt. His work is a substantial contribution to the broader issues under debate.

And yet the book is hampered by its proportions. Prior covers each installment in these debates in detail, so the wood is easily obscured by all the trees. Since trees of

the same variety are so similar to each other, repetition is inevitable and the same ideas tend to recur. It is also difficult to get a sense of what lies beyond the confines of the wood. How much of the available material is being covered? What works, subjects, or debates are being left out, if any? The most illuminating perspective comes in a quote from Anthony Milton: “the greater proportion of printed, religious literature on the period 1600-40 remains almost wholly unstudied, and much historiographical debate has focused on a tiny sample of surviving material” (p. 257). The implication is that scholars have been fixated by issues of soteriology because they have considered only a fraction of the material. Yet that remains only an implication, since Prior explores in any detail only these works on ecclesiology. Other, more tantalizing and far-reaching arguments also remain implicit, largely because the book’s time frame cuts off at 1625. Prior argues there was no great disjunction in the Church after 1625, that ecclesiological conflict carried on much as it always had, and that, by implication, soteriology remained relatively unimportant; yet none of this can be proved since the scope of the book ends at the death of James I. Having alluded to the civil wars in several places, Prior leaves the reader wondering why they broke out at all if soteriology was not the most compelling issue, if the policies of Laud and Charles were not unprecedented, and if the truly decisive issues had been steadily debated since the middle of the sixteenth century.

This is not at all to say that Prior’s arguments are wrong, but more work needs to be done to confirm these implications. We can be grateful, then, not just for the labor already undertaken, but for Prior’s intention “to illustrate these themes in a future study” (p. 265). That sounds like a book worth waiting for.

#### Note

[1]. For a broad sense of this consensus, see Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Peter White, *Predestination, Policy and Polemic: Conflict and Consensus in the English Church from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism, 1625-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); and Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Tim E. Cooper III. Review of Prior, Charles, *Defining the Jacobean Church: The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603-1625*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12582>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).