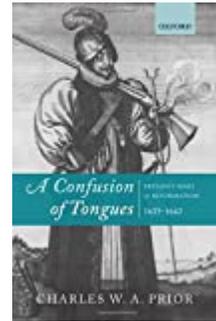


Charles W. A. Prior. *A Confusion of Tongues: Britain's Wars of Reformation, 1625-1642.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 304 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-969825-7.



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Published on H-Albion (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Charles W. A. Prior has chosen a very fitting title for his book, *A Confusion of Tongues*. In it, he outlines some of the complex and intractable debates within and around the Caroline Church, focusing on their legal and historical aspects. Indeed, he argues that it was the extremely untidy mixture of religion, law, and history—itsself the legacy of Henry VIII's Reformation—that led to the crisis of the early 1640s. Prior illustrates clearly the intricacy and the interconnectedness of these Caroline controversies, and goes on to argue that the civil wars were driven by a complex struggle to define the meaning of the key religious and political texts (p. 230). His aim is to challenge interpretations of the civil war that prioritize one element of the English mixture at the expense of the others, and to show instead that religion, political thought, and law cannot be separated from each other. Moreover, he claims that it was the very confusion and instability that this mixture created, rather than deep ideological divisions, that led to the civil wars.

As in his earlier book *Defining the Jacobean Church: The Politics of Religious Controversy, 1603-1625* (2005), Prior argues that we have concentrated too much on the doctrinal divisions within England and that we need to broaden our perspective to include issues of law, ecclesiology, and church history. This central thesis is per-

suasive, and Prior provides some detailed case studies demonstrating the interaction between these subjects. The first chapter discusses the issue of religious conformity, which drew together questions of spiritual and temporal obedience; Prior argues that the ensuing debate fostered the creation of rival narratives of English religious history. These narratives are then examined in more detail in chapter 2, where Prior claims that the disputes over ceremonies in worship were also tied to rival visions of the English past. In both cases, he presents full accounts (including lengthy quotations) of the texts discussed, giving a flavor of the tone and scope of the arguments.

Subsequent chapters deal with the build up to war, and the role played by these different versions of history. The Scots, Prior argues in chapter 4, had their own, self-conscious, history of ecclesiastical liberty which could be deployed against Charles; and the events of the late 1630s served to amplify the link in Scottish minds between liberty and purity of doctrine. We then move back to England, for a discussion of the canons of 1640 in chapter 5. By now, of course, the crisis in England was deepening, and Charles's position in December 1640, when the canons were condemned by the Commons, was weak. Prior's focus, though, is resolutely on arguments rather than events, and the debate over the canons is, for him,

best characterized as an intensification of positions that had been current since at least 1604. One side (here represented by Joseph Hall) stressed the authority of the Crown over (or within) the church; the other (here led by Henry Burton) claimed that to alter religion was to undermine English liberty. The logic of the debate brought into focus the tension between the powers of the Crown and bishops, and the institutions of law and Parliament. But the tension was not resolved by further debates; instead, as the next chapter shows, further constitutional questions generated a plurality of narratives, exacerbating the problem.

In the last two chapters, Prior discusses the efforts of two men to overcome this tension: Thomas Aston and Henry Parker. Aston insisted that episcopacy was part of the English constitution, but Parker refused to accept the legitimacy of custom and precedent. Instead he developed a more complicated argument, which, at root, linked authority to the consent of the governed. Prior's point, developed a little further in the conclusion, is that neither of these attempted solutions worked, and the continuing instability led to war.

Prior's account of these debates is multilayered, drawing our attention to several neglected but important texts. My brief summaries of each chapter do not capture their spirit, for they are elaborate accounts of the twists and turns of Caroline debate—and not easily skimmed

through. But whereas the arguments are fleshed out, the protagonists of the debates can seem somewhat disembodied and decontextualized; and that makes it difficult to assess the significance of their works. Only with Aston is there much attempt to place an author within his political and religious context, or to outline the networks to which he belonged. The reader is often left wondering who read the texts discussed and how widely they circulated. Moreover, and more problematic, there is surprisingly little discussion of the relationship between these texts and the actual events of the period. Prior claims that the instability of English (and Scottish) intellectual culture was directly related to the outbreak of war, but such a claim surely requires further evidence, and a more detailed discussion of the broader political history of the early 1640s. Furthermore, the failure of the syntheses offered by Aston and Parker is accorded great significance, yet neither of these were major players, and Prior might do more to disentangle the intellectual importance of their projects from the political impact they had.

This is a challenging book, which eschews firm or clear conclusions but which invites the reader to experience the complexity of early Stuart debates. Readers will need to decide for themselves the significance of these debates, and may want to explore further their relationship to the broader history of the period. But Prior has drawn our attention to the confusion of the period in interesting ways, which will enrich future scholarship.

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Citation: Sarah Mortimer. Review of Prior, Charles W. A., *A Confusion of Tongues: Britain's Wars of Reformation, 1625-1642*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

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