

Review Article: A Jacobean Consensus? The Religious Policy of James VI and I

W. B. Patterson, *King James I and the Reunion of Christendom*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, hb. £40, ISBN 0 521 41805 4; **Peter E. McCullough**, *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, hb. £35, ISBN 0 521 590946 9; **Lori Anne Ferrell**, *Government by Polemic: James I, the King's Preachers, and the Rhetorics of Conformity*, Stanford University Press, 1998, hb. £30, ISBN 0 0847 3221 3

'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh ... and there is no new thing under the sun' (Eccl. 1: 4–9). The revisionist interpretation of early Stuart history is often regarded as a recent phenomenon, but there is a good case for arguing that the first of the revisionist historians was Isaac D'Israeli, whose *Inquiry into the Literary and Political Character of James the First* was published as long ago as 1816. D'Israeli praised James for his 'great learning and sense', his 'ready knowledge of biblical learning' and the 'force and quickness of his arguments', and defended him against the accusation of 'pedantry' by pointing out that his studies of polemical divinity had a political purpose: 'The pacific government of James I required that the King himself should be a master of those controversies to be enabled to balance the conflicting parties; and none but a learned king could have exerted the industry or attained to the skill.' Yet D'Israeli gloomily predicted that this would fail to convince his readers – most of whom, he wrote, 'have long been persuaded that James I was a mere college pedant, and that all his works, whatever they may be, are monstrous pedantic labours'. His prediction is borne out by the three books under review. One declares that James has been 'long regarded as inept, pedantic and whimsical', another complains that James is popularly perceived as a 'religious pedant with no morals', and the third, more picturesquely, claims that James has frequently been dismissed as 'a crude and slobbery pedant-king'. Together, they go a long way towards dispelling that impression, and may

be said to complete the rehabilitation of James begun by D'Israeli nearly two centuries ago.

The most substantial and ambitious of the three is W. B. Patterson's *King James VI and the Reunion of Christendom*. In the preface, Patterson is disarmingly modest about the scope and purpose of the book: it is, he writes, 'not a political biography [of James], nor a church history of his reign, nor an account of his foreign policy'. In fact, it is all these things and more. Patterson focuses on the theme of reconciliation, which he sees as James's governing principle throughout his life – from his early years in Scotland, when he rather naively tried to reconcile differences among the Scottish nobility by inviting them to walk hand in hand through the streets of Edinburgh, to his later years on the throne of England, when he sought to realise the same ideal on an international stage by committing himself to the project of a general ecumenical council, which he saw as a means of healing the confessional divisions of Western Europe. In Patterson's words, 'James saw religious reconciliation as the key to a stable and peaceful Christendom at a time when religious disputes exacerbated the conflicts among states.' Some earlier scholars – notably Hugh Trevor-Roper – have already drawn attention to James's projects for Christian reunion, but Patterson is the first to offer a really convincing interpretation of them. Whereas Trevor-Roper saw them as the manifestation of an 'Erasmian impulse' transcending national boundaries, Patterson sees them as an expression of what might be called 'monarchical conciliarism', in which the ideal of a general council was combined with a strong assertion of the autonomy of the nation-state. In this respect, James 'may fairly be said to have been one of the prophets of the new age of sovereign, independent states.'

This brief summary of Patterson's argument cannot convey the detail and richness of the book. The range of sources – including archives in Geneva, Paris and Rome – is astonishing, and enables one, for the first time, to see James's foreign policy in its international context. In discussing James's *Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance* (1607), Patterson shows how the work provoked markedly different reactions in different parts of Europe – predictably hostile in Rome, where Cardinal Borghese described it bluntly as 'pernicious' and tried to dissuade other Catholic countries from accepting copies, but unexpectedly sympathetic in Paris, where Henry IV declared that there were 'many good things' in it. There is a fascinating chapter on James's contacts with foreign scholars such as Casaubon and Grotius; and another, equally fascinating, on the Synod of Tonneins, an attempt to reconcile the Lutheran and Reformed churches which was warmly supported by the King but was eventually overtaken by the theological disputes in the Netherlands. Here again, Patterson draws on material from a variety of different archives in order to produce a multidimensional analysis, juxtaposing the public acts of the Synod (from a manuscript at Montpellier) with the private dispatches of the English ambassador Sir Thomas Edmondes. His grasp of theological issues is sure – the chapter on the Synod of Dort, for example, provides a valuable corrective – to the work of Peter White,

which has until now been the fullest account of the Synod available in English – but the book will be of interest not only to historians of Protestant theology but to anyone concerned with the history of ideas in this period. Indeed, anyone researching early modern British history in French or Italian archives, whatever their particular interest, will find the book a very helpful guide to the available sources.

But while Patterson's scholarship is impeccable, his arguments do not always carry conviction, particularly when he analyses the motives behind James's support for ecumenical reunion. He sees James as sincerely committed to the idea of a general council as a means of achieving religious unity; and while he recognises that ecumenical dialogue sometimes went hand in hand with political self-interest (Richard Bancroft, for example, negotiated with the Catholic clergy in England as part of a divide-and-rule policy designed to separate the Jesuits and the secular priests), he never suggests that James was inspired by anything less than the highest ecumenical ideals. James's misfortune, as Patterson sees it, was that so few of his contemporaries shared his far-sighted vision of a Europe united by a common Christian faith. 'James ... had hoped to recover something of the lost unity of Christendom by bringing Protestants and Roman Catholics together in a general council to affirm their common heritage in the Catholic faith of antiquity ... But this was the part of his message which few members of his international audience ... seemed to share.' In order to sustain this interpretation of James as an ecumenical giant in a world of dwarfs, Patterson passes rather lightly over some inconvenient pieces of evidence. The anti-papal polemic of the *Apologie* has to be explained away ('the section on the Antichrist was surely a tactical mistake') and the effects of the anti-Catholic penal laws are minimised: Patterson admits that the laws were still in operation, but lamely declares that 'by one index, religious persecution was far less severe than in Elizabeth I's reign' as only seventeen Catholic priests were executed during the reign of James.

How genuine, one wonders, was James's commitment to the cause of ecumenical reunion? In the endless war of words between Catholics and Protestants, the call for a general council was part of the polemical armoury of both sides: Protestant writers argued that the Pope should renounce his claim to universal spiritual jurisdiction, and acknowledge the superior authority of a general council, while their Catholic opponents retorted that if Protestants were serious in their conciliarism, they should first summon a council to resolve their own differences. Patterson acknowledges this, but argues that James's proposal, unlike the others, was not simply a gambit in a polemical chess-game. James was realistic enough to recognise that 'no movement to resolve the religious issues in dispute was likely to have much chance of success without papal leadership and support', and thus appealed to the Pope to convene a council – a bold step which, in Patterson's view, proves that he was in earnest. But did James's apparent willingness to accept papal leadership actually make any difference? What appeared at first sight to be a substantial

concession turned out, on closer inspection, to carry a large price-tag: as James explained to the French ambassador, he was prepared to acknowledge the Pope as ‘the first among bishops’, but only if the Pope would relinquish his ‘pretension ... that he has the power to depose princes’. This *quid pro quo* never stood much chance of being accepted, and in 1614 the papal nuncio in Paris concluded that James had broached the possibility of a council ‘more for the purpose of discussion than because he has a sincere and serious intention ... of uniting himself to the Holy Catholic Church’.

Putting James’s ecumenical projects in a wider perspective – and with a nod in the direction of more recent ecumenical initiatives such as ARCIC – Patterson suggests that the Church of England was particularly well equipped to engage in ecumenical dialogue because of the pluralist nature of the Anglican settlement. In his own words, ‘the English Church developed a distinctive set of doctrines which recognised the authenticity of many expressions of Christianity within the one Church, and which held out the prospect of a visible manifestation of that unity if and when the churches and nations of the Christian world were ready to take the appropriate steps to achieve it.’ This is an attractive vision, but does it really amount to much? Even Patterson has to admit that there were intractable, perhaps insuperable, doctrinal obstacles to Christian reunion – though he characteristically tries to salvage James’s reputation by arguing that James, far-sighted as he was, recognised the difficulties that less realistic ecumenists chose to ignore: ‘Differences between Lutherans and Calvinists were bitter and deep and could not be so easily papered over as the drafters [at the Synod of Tonneins] seemed to believe ... James no doubt recognised this.’ It is a pity that Patterson is so determined to defend James’s reputation as the high-minded champion of Christian unity, because it obscures the more complex, more interesting and arguably more flattering picture of James that emerges from the evidence he cites. James may have dreamed of a day when all Christians would be reconciled; but he was, above all, a realistic and experienced statesman who knew how to play the ecumenical card to maximum political and diplomatic advantage.

One might have expected Peter McCullough’s *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching* to complement Patterson’s book by showing how royal policy was communicated to a wider public – and, where necessary, defended against hostile criticism – through the sermons preached at court. To some extent, this is true. He shows, for example, how Elizabeth used court sermons to send signals to foreign observers about her religious moderation – an insight nicely corroborated by Lori Anne Ferrell’s demonstration (in the book reviewed below) of the way that James used the sermons preached at the English court to send messages back to Scotland. But the main thrust of McCullough’s book is rather different, for he argues that court sermons were not simply a reflection of royal policy. ‘Within the boundaries of a broadly defined conformity, the court pulpit was a site of conflict, not consensus ... Court preachers were just as likely to come to court trying to

influence royal opinions as they were to parrot them.' In particular, he detects a conflict between two opposing styles of piety, one centred on preaching and the other on the sacraments – a conflict that can be traced back to the reign of Elizabeth, when 'one might have heard both the shrill anti-Catholicism of the controversialist William Fulke and the irenic sacramentalism of the Queen's Almoner, Edmund Guest' competing for royal attention, but that became much more intense in the reign of James, when preachers as sharply contrasted as George Abbot and William Laud occupied the royal pulpit on successive days. Court sermons do not necessarily hold up a mirror to the monarch's own religious opinions, but they have a great deal to tell us about the fault-lines in the religious settlement.

The book is essentially an attempt to place court sermons in their historical context, by assembling them in chronological order and looking for any patterns that emerge. The results are significant and often surprising. Lancelot Andrewes's sermon on Philippians 2: 10 ('At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow'), preached before the King on Easter Day 1614, is widely regarded as one of the most important sermons preached at the Jacobean court – a key statement of the position that some historians have labelled 'avant-garde conformity', which anticipates the new emphasis on ritual and ceremony in the 1620s and 1630s – but what no one has realised, until now, is that it was only one side of an ongoing debate about the significance of religious gesture, a debate conducted in the court pulpit and implicitly addressed to the King. Only a week later, another court preacher, Norwich Spackman, bluntly informed the congregation at Whitehall that God 'will not have a bended knee, but an upright heart ... not prostrated bodies but humbled soules' – a clear riposte to Andrewes's argument. How was it possible for two court preachers to disagree so openly? The answer, as McCullough shows, is that the right to appoint court preachers was effectively shared between the Dean of the Chapel Royal (who selected the King's chaplains in ordinary) and the Clerk of the Closet (who drew up the Lent preaching rota), two posts which, for much of the Jacobean period, were filled by men of different religious persuasions, James Montagu and Richard Neile respectively. He plausibly suggests that this was a deliberate attempt on James's part to balance the opposing religious factions at court. Once again we come back to the theme of reconciliation which looms so large in Patterson's book, though McCullough is more willing to acknowledge the element of pragmatism involved.

The most original and outstanding feature of McCullough's book, however, is the chapter on the architectural setting of court preaching, usefully illustrated with maps, plans and contemporary engravings of the royal chapels at Whitehall, Richmond and Hampton Court, and the outdoor 'preaching place' at Whitehall. All three chapels contained a royal closet (similar to a royal box in a modern theatre, but screened from public view by means of a window), from which, as McCullough explains, 'the monarch could both watch and hear the service below and still remain in privacy'. The preacher must have

been acutely conscious of the royal presence – particularly in the chapel at Richmond, where the pulpit stood directly underneath the closet, ‘literally under the monarch’s nose’ – but the royal response remained inscrutable until the end of the sermon, when it was Elizabeth’s custom to open the window, either to thank the preacher or to criticise the sermon. When Bishop Anthony Rudd caused offence in a sermon of 1596 by reminding the Queen of her mortality, Elizabeth ‘(as the manner was) opened the window’, but instead of thanking the preacher, observed pointedly that ‘the greatest Clerks are not the wisest men’. Yet, as McCullough demonstrates, preachers had more liberty to exhort or admonish the monarch in the relative privacy of the royal chapels than in the more public arena of the outdoor pulpit at Whitehall, where the congregation included ordinary Londoners as well as courtiers, and where the monarch was visible to the audience throughout the sermon.

In this respect, McCullough’s book marks not only a renaissance but also a revolution in early modern sermon studies. He is not the first scholar to study the sermons preached at a particular location, or before a particular audience – one thinks, for example, of Millar MacLure’s monograph, *The Paul’s Cross Sermons* (1958) – but he is the first to achieve a really satisfactory marriage of text and context, and to show how the meaning and interpretation of sermons were conditioned, even determined, by the circumstances of their delivery. His book is full of unexpected insights, but his most striking discovery is to be found in his account of the liturgical context of court preaching, where he shows that Elizabeth and James differed very sharply in their patterns of sermon attendance. Elizabeth regularly attended ‘public service’ (a slightly ambiguous term, but one that apparently refers to the Prayer Book service of antecommunion, with the inclusion of the psalms appointed for morning prayer) on Sundays and holy days, even on ferial Sundays when no sermon was preached. James, by contrast, tended to arrive in the middle of the service, and his arrival was interpreted as a signal for the sermon to begin. Peter Heylyn later recalled that ‘at what part soever of the Publick Prayers the King came into his Closet to hear the Sermon, the Divine Service was cut off, and the Anthem sung, that the Preacher might go into the Pulpit’. This abrupt termination of the liturgy – a custom introduced by James from the Scottish court – evidently struck some observers as irreverent, and when Laud succeeded Andrewes as Dean of the Chapel Royal in 1626, he promptly restored the Elizabethan tradition by insisting that the service be said in full.

This has important implications for the way we read Jacobean court sermons. The sermons of Lancelot Andrewes, for example, contain frequent warnings against over-reliance on preaching, and these have generally been interpreted in terms of a conflict between two opposing styles of churchmanship: the sermon-centred churchmanship of the Elizabethan and Jacobean mainstream, and the more sacramental churchmanship associated with Laudianism. But, as McCullough points out, Andrewes’s sermons ‘prove to be much more court-specific than has been hitherto acknowledged’, and it now looks as though

his repeated criticisms of ‘the common error, that Sermon-hearing is the *Consummatum est* of all Christianitie’ were directed specifically at the King. If so, one cannot help wondering whether the contrast between ‘sermon-centred’ and ‘sacrament-centred’ churchmanship may have been overdrawn. It is at least arguable that scholars have made the mistake of generalising too readily from the situation at court, and that the ‘Jacobean consensus’ so often taken as representative of the early seventeenth-century Church of England (and contrasted with the breakdown of consensus under Laud) is, in fact, simply a reflection of the liturgical routine of the Jacobean chapel royal. McCullough does not tackle these issues, and makes little effort to question the distinction between ‘sermon-centred’ and ‘sacrament-centred’ piety (which explains why Donne, who cannot easily be fitted into either category, is dismissed as ‘ecclesiological muddled’), but his book is bound to provoke debate about the relationship between the Jacobean court and the wider world of the Jacobean church.

The book comes with a diskette containing a calendar of all known sermons preached at court between 1558 and 1625. Most of these sermons were never published, though a few survive in manuscript, but the recent rediscovery of Archbishop Whitgift’s lists of Lenten preachers (Westminster Abbey, Munitment Book 15) has enabled McCullough to fill in many of the gaps. Where a sermon does survive, he provides a helpful summary of its contents, as well as identifying the preacher’s text (revealing a heavy preponderance of sermons on the Psalms, in contrast to the Jeremiads and Hoseads that formed the standard fare at Paul’s Cross) and drawing attention to contemporary comments and reactions. A full printout of this calendar runs to 322 A4 pages, so Cambridge University Press can be forgiven for their decision to publish it on disk rather than printing it as an appendix to the book, but there is a real danger that many readers may ignore it or even remain unaware of its existence. (My university library is probably typical of many in having removed the diskette before putting the book on the open shelves.) This would be a great pity, for what it reveals is that the book, for all its wealth of detail, has done little more than scratch the surface of an enormously rich and diverse body of material. In his preface, McCullough comments wryly on the academic industry devoted to court masques and other forms of secular drama, as opposed to the ‘bizarre gap in the historiography’ where court sermons are concerned. His book handsomely redresses the balance, but one hopes it will also serve as a stimulus to further research.

Lori Anne Ferrell’s *Government by Polemic* suffers from appearing simultaneously with the other two books reviewed here, and thus being unable to incorporate their insights. It tends to underrate James’s foreign policy – describing the *Apologie*, for example, as ‘so markedly anti-papal, its tone so strident, that it complicated James’s European diplomacy’, not really a view that can survive a careful reading of Patterson – and sometimes errs by equating the views of James’s court preachers with those of James himself. Nevertheless, it has its own original and important contribution to

make, particularly in its analysis of rhetoric. Neither of the other two books is particularly sensitive to the use of rhetoric: Patterson, as we have seen, tends to treat James's public statements as a transparent guide to his intentions, while McCullough's recontextualisation of court preaching has surprisingly little to say about the sermons as literary texts. Ferrell, by contrast, sees rhetoric as the key to explaining a problem that has perplexed recent historians: how to incorporate conflict within a revisionist model. 'Many scholars have all but eliminated every possible point of contention that might have divided the Jacobean church, and yet we know that James's was not an entirely reformed, quiet or contented religious settlement'. The explanation, she suggests, lies in the type of rhetoric used to justify the Jacobean church. 'When we analyse the rhetoric of religion, we recognise that James I ruled over a powder keg.'

Ferrell's book comes garlanded with praise: Paul Seaver declares on the dust-jacket that 'it completes the overthrow of what has been the dominant interpretation of early Stuart politics', while John Guy has stated in a recent review (*Church Times*, 9 April 1999) that it 'wreaks the havoc of a blast of Semtex' by exploding 'recent revisionist interpretations of James I that stress his role as a royal peacemaker, and his reign in England as an oasis of harmony and consensus'. Ferrell's own claims are more modest. She makes it clear that her book is not a rejection of revisionism, still less a return to Whig history: instead, it 'builds on the revisionist focus on the court as the primary locus of political activity', but 'recasts the narrative offered by revisionists and recognises the part rhetoric plays in designing it'. She does not question the revisionist view of James's religious policy as concerned, above all, with the maintenance of order and stability; but she argues that its claim to moderation was merely a rhetorical strategy which should not be taken at face value. The official spokesmen of the Jacobean church sought to achieve religious stability not by accommodating puritanism within a broad-based doctrinal consensus, but by marginalising it in ways that foreshadowed the aggressive anti-puritan propaganda of the 1630s. As she concludes: 'If the cultural origins of the English Civil War can be traced, at least in part, to Laudian ecclesiastical policy, then the discursive origins of that policy can be found, at least in part, in the sermons of the Jacobean court.' For all its careful qualifications, this is a significant conclusion which does call certain aspects of the revisionist interpretation into question.

In particular, Ferrell's book serves as a salutary warning against appealing too readily to the idea of a 'Jacobean consensus', as revisionist historians are apt to do. John Morrill, for example, has argued that whereas James 'proved just as successful as Elizabeth in holding the religious centre together', Charles made the disastrous mistake of pursuing 'devious if not deviant religious policies' which shattered the consensus so carefully constructed by his predecessors: 'If the worst that could be said of James I by his puritan critics was that he was moving the Church of England too slowly in the right direction, then Charles I was all too generally seen as frogmarching it Rome-wards.' The problem with this interpretation is that it fails to explain why

Charles should have departed so radically from a religious policy that had proved so successful in the past: as Anthony Milton commented perceptively in his seminal work *Catholic and Reformed* (1995), ‘more attention may need to be paid to *why* Charles and his allies chose to ignore established rhetorical conventions’. Ferrell’s answer is that they were doing nothing of the sort: far from ignoring the accepted conventions of religious discourse, Laudian divines were actually building on a ‘bedrock of Jacobean sermon polemic’. Instead of seeing a Jacobean consensus jeopardised by Charles’s misguided religious policies, we should be thinking in terms of an Elizabethan consensus that was already starting to break down in the reign of James – partly because James, unlike Elizabeth, chose to demonstrate his commitment to the cause of moderation ‘by encouraging rather than suppressing debate’, thus giving free rein to anti-puritan polemic.

This is a much more persuasive account of the origins of Laudianism than anything previously offered by the revisionists. However, there are serious problems with Ferrell’s use of terms such as ‘rhetoric’ and ‘polemic’ which play such an important part in her argument. She presents her analysis of religious polemic as a necessary corrective to the work of other historians who have ‘focused almost exclusively on the doctrinal beliefs of Calvinists and anti-Calvinists, thereby limiting the focus of their debate to the definition of systems of salvation ... A concentration on the taut logic of theology leaves no room for consideration of the politic flexibility of post-Reformation religious language’. It is fair enough to say that early modern theology has a polemical dimension, but it is quite another thing to separate theology and polemic into two separate fields of discourse, as Ferrell appears to be doing here. A further problem is that, despite her emphasis on the ‘flexibility of seventeenth-century religious polemic’, she fails to build this flexibility into her analysis. At various points in the book, Jacobean religious polemic is described as ‘virulent’, ‘highly polarised’, ‘a rhetoric of extremity’, and ‘a language of unparalleled intolerance and denunciation’. What, the bemused reader may ask, was flexible about that? Ferrell is far more interested in the social and political function of religion than in the intellectual arguments being deployed, and (like many modern liberals) appears to regard theology as essentially meaningless except insofar as it provided the raw material out of which to construct polemic.

It also has to be said that, despite her emphasis on the need to be ‘sensitive to the nuances of Jacobean discourse’, Ferrell is often disturbingly imprecise in her analysis of contemporary terminology. A case in point is her discussion of the term ‘formalist’. She draws attention to a number of early Jacobean court sermons referring to ‘formalists’ (defined in one sermon of 1604 as those ‘in places of high authority’ who ‘do for fashion sake shuffle over matters of importance, without any conscionable desire of reformation’), which, as she points out, are obviously intended to be applied to some person or persons at court. From the context, it appears likely that they refer to suspected

church papists such as the Earl of Northampton, who were felt to have concealed their true religious opinions in order to gain royal favour, but Ferrell interprets them as a coded attack on anti-Calvinist divines such as Andrewes, who were perceived by their opponents as having ‘insinuated themselves into the king’s favour and placed their stamp on his ecclesiastical policy’. This is a point of some significance, since it enables Ferrell to argue that as early as 1604–05, the Elizabethan consensus was already starting to fall apart. By equating ‘formalist’ with ‘anti-Calvinist’ (and later with ‘sacramentalist’), it is possible for her to trace a continuous tradition of anti-Calvinist polemic running right through the Jacobean period, and to suggest that the origins of Laudianism are to be found at the beginning of James’s reign. In this, as in other respects, she may be overestimating the extent of religious conflict at the Jacobean court.

As will be apparent, I am not in total agreement with all the arguments presented in these three books; but it would be impossible to end this review without acknowledging that they represent an important step forward in our understanding of Jacobean politics and religion. In the wake of this new wave of scholarship, it is probably fair to say that James’s reign has been studied more intensively than that of any other early modern British monarch, a situation which contrasts strikingly with the lack of reliable scholarship on the reign of Charles I. All three of these books have interesting things to say about Charles. Patterson, for example, draws attention to Charles’s patronage of Greek visitors to England, and suggests that it should be seen as a continuation of his father’s ecumenical activities, while McCullough discusses the sermons preached before Charles as Prince of Wales, and attributes their strongly anti-Catholic tone to the fact that Charles had inherited many of his household chaplains from his elder brother Henry. None of them, however, discusses Charles’s reign in any detail; and McCullough’s decision to end his book in 1625, without attempting a comparison of Jacobean and Caroline court sermons, is especially tantalising. This wealth of new scholarship on James makes one realise how many aspects of Charles’s religious policy still remain mysterious. One can only hope that it will encourage other scholars to re-examine the ‘Jacobean consensus’ from the vantage-point of the 1630s.

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