



James K. Cameron symposium 2

Reflections on the ongoing dialogue between Renaissance and Reformation

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Some twenty years ago (hard as that now seems to believe) the Ecclesiastical History Society published a Festschrift volume to mark the retirement of James K. Cameron. It was entitled *Humanism and Reform: The Church in Europe, England and Scotland 1400–1643*.¹ That title, and the contents of the volume, reflected an abiding theme of my father's scholarly work for almost the whole of his career. The values and ideals of reformed scholarship and religious reform overlapped in mysterious and ever-changing ways. The international community of scholars created links across continents, and built up a moral community which would support projects and campaigns to reform both academy and church. Yet, as we all know, not everyone in the scholarly Renaissance embraced the Reformation (by a long way) while religious reformers differed in their estimates of the value of secular scholarship and *belles-lettres*. Though my father and I have plied our craft as historians in quite different ways as we ploughed over some of the same fields, the relationship between Renaissance and Reformation is one topic of fascination which we have shared from the start. Some of my earliest published efforts arose out of our shared interest in the Renaissance Latin writings of early Scots humanists; my contribution to the 1991 Festschrift addressed a related theme.² Therefore, the most appropriate tribute which I can offer for this occasion is to revisit the topic one more time in the light of the work done and read in the intervening years.

I

The religious critics of the northern European Renaissance set out fairly precise and widely-shared critiques of clergy behaviour, academic theology and popular religious practice. While Erasmus was by no means typical, and many of his contemporaries in one way or another showed greater loyalty or forbearance to the traditional pieties, the broad lines of his critique visibly influenced many others. First of all, a strain of anticlerical criticism berated the (presumably less educated and less ‘humane’) lesser clergy and regulars for a range of moral failings. They were allegedly avaricious, more concerned with revenues than souls. They were supposed to ‘think it the highest form of piety to be so ignorant that they could not even read’. Most seriously, they were accused of competing with each other on minor points of difference, of clouding the gospel beneath the fog of ecclesiastical rivalries. None of these charges were particularly new: one could find similar ethical critiques among the conciliar theorists of around 1400, or among monastic reformers, or religious visionaries quite untouched by humanism.³ However, by c. 1500 these critiques had clothed themselves in the garb of Latinate humanist ethics, and wore that clothing for the first decades of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

A second mode of criticism aimed at more specific targets and belonged to a cast of thought more narrowly aligned with the Northern Renaissance. It was argued that the academic theology practiced in the medieval schools was deplorably lacking. Humanist scholars – not just Erasmus – decried traditional scholastic theology for its over-elaborate technical virtuosity and complexity. (Some humanists were of course also practitioners of scholastic logic, but that did not necessarily spoil a good cliché.) For those who took cues from Erasmus, the essential point was that if a theological system showed no interest in inspiring and fortifying ethical, pastoral Christianity, then it was so much hot air. At the other cultural and educational extreme, more than one humanist deplored quite different forms of religious activity which appeared to have no connection with moral improvement. The belief that wearing a monastic cowl or the habit of an order could earn merit; the assumption that mere performance of ceremonial duties such as

fasts would be rewarded; the expectation of concrete and reliable benefits from venerating saints, even when such veneration was not accompanied by a saintly life: these kinds of ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices reduced the less educated Christians to barely above the level of paganism.⁴

Any attempt to draw a hard and fast distinction between Renaissance humanist critiques of the old church and proto-Protestant expressions of protest will probably prove unhelpful on the overlapping zones between the two movements. In many countries, including Scotland, decades of agitation, discussion and debate preceded the formal implementation of Reformation-style changes to the church. In these circumstances, many religious figures who would in due course declare support for the Reformation spent years, possibly quite sincerely, identifying themselves as loyal Catholic critics of a Renaissance type. At the very beginning of my work in historical research, my father passed over to me photographic copies of the unique edition of the *Oration in Support of Founding a College*, published in 1538 from the Collège de Montaigu in Paris by Archibald Hay (d. 1547), to see what several years of public-school education in the classics might allow me to do with it. On the face of it the *Oration* presented a classic example of the Renaissance cultivation of a patron – in this case Archbishop James Beaton, who had offered some money to support the re-foundation of the Pedagogy in St Andrews University as what was destined ultimately to become St Mary’s College, where we are now. Numerous clichés about the value of Renaissance education were paraded, along with criticisms of those clergy who failed to live up to sufficient intellectual standards. However, there was more to the *Oration* than that. For those who had eyes to see, Archibald Hay surreptitiously included a significant number of unacknowledged quotations from the most virulently anticlerical passages of the *Praise of Folly*. He did so in contexts which made it fairly clear that he was covertly satirizing his older and presumably less-well read relative the archbishop.⁵ Two years later Hay dedicated an even longer oration, the *Panegyric*, to his cousin Cardinal David Beaton.⁶ Here Hay ostensibly congratulated Beaton on his elevation to the cardinalate, but returned to the same theme of urging the foundation of the college. In this text he openly admitted that his late uncle’s avarice had delayed the

project, unmasking some of his own previously covert criticisms.

Another Scots humanist who hovered even closer to the edge between Renaissance rhetoric and virulent anticlericalism was Sir David Lyndsay of the Mount (c. 1486–1555). His *Ane Dialog Betuix Experience and ane Courteour off the Miserabyll Estait of the World* (1554) suggested a rather different approach to the social and religious problems of Scotland from some of his earlier, more overtly satirical works. In an extended passage in this work Lyndsay denounced the way in which costly images were venerated with quasi-pagan idolatry, not to be distinguished from the minor deities of classical paganism: ‘Quhilk war to lang for tyll declare / Thare superstitious pylgramageis / To mony diuers Imageis’. Saints were cultivated for material benefits, and the clergy consistently failed to correct the errors of their people. Demons spoke through images to deceive people; clergy connived at the cults of dumb useless effigies; the veneration of images was as idolatrous and futile as the idolatry denounced in the Old Testament. The superstitious belief of monks and friars in the privileged status of their orders would be mightily disillusioned at the Last Judgment.⁷ By the 1550s, the scope of such a humanist ‘small-r’ reforming rhetoric had broadened its attack significantly. There was no ambivalence or irony about the manner in which Lyndsay accused the cult of images of idolatry: his critique read and sounded very similar to that, for instance, of Heinrich Bullinger in the much earlier work, *On the Origin of Error*.⁸

By the late ‘humanist’ pre-reform period, especially in Scotland (and perhaps also in England of the 1540s) the critique of traditional religion was beginning to acquire significant dogmatic content. Parts of the critique had by this time encroached on formerly agreed and accepted parts of religious practice, rather than just the ‘excesses’ which moral reformers had already denounced in the fifteenth century. That may help to explain a fact which James Cameron remarked upon in a 1979 article. A puzzle of the early Scottish Reformation is that the ostensibly Catholic leadership of the Scottish church quite abruptly and apparently with little personal cost, turned around and embraced the Reformation when the political circumstances changed in 1560.⁹ Perhaps the best image is of a broad area of debatable or no-man’s-land between Renaissance and Reformation. Those who wandered

into this territory with ostensibly Catholic motives could easily find that they had crossed an unmarked border, and slip into reformed ways with little conscious effort.

That conclusion, while it affects the *psychology* of the transition from humanism to Reformation, does not in any way contradict or minimize the *theological* significance of the shift from one to the other. Insofar as the northern Renaissance humanists, *qua* humanists, formulated or embraced any dogmatic positions, they probably adhered to an ethical theology, which allowed for a mysterious and unfathomable synergy between human love and divine grace. Those who adopted or conformed to the teachings of the reformers embraced a quite different set of beliefs. The magisterial Reformation was tied together by the insight that divine grace works on people before they are conscious of it, and that divine judgment accepts people before they can possibly begin to deserve it. That which made a person acceptable before God was no part of their inner nature: it was the *extrinsic* grace and forgiveness of God won by Jesus Christ. Therefore, the performance of elaborate religious duties was not only otiose but wrong, and wrong for reasons far more cogent and categorical than those felt by the humanists. Trust in God, and right social actions towards one's neighbour were required, though these would always serve as the insufficient outward manifestations of inward grace. Thus, the humanist criticisms of the old religion still stood, but now they were undergirded by a quite different set of theological rationales.

II

On one hand, the transition from Renaissance humanist to reformer represented an almost imperceptible shift across a barely visible boundary. On another, it entailed – whether the adherent was conscious of the fact or not – the adoption of a defining theological stance quite at odds with the older humanists' native instincts. That transition in turn raises a further question, addressed profoundly and repeatedly in James Cameron's work. What became of the Renaissance heritage in the later history of the Reformation, in Scotland and in Europe? This question takes one into the heart of two evolutionary processes: the development and articulation of the theological language of the

Protestant churches on one hand, and the progressive specialization of Renaissance critical scholarship on the other.

There was something of a generational difference, not to say a debate, over language and theological technique between those reformers who flourished in the first half of the sixteenth century and those who came later. The common culture of the Renaissance imbued the learned with a passion for rhetorical and literary flair. Good writing should not only express a truth accurately, but should also persuade by its eloquence. There is abundant evidence that (to name but three) Luther, Melancthon and Calvin all shared this conviction, and manifested it in their writings.¹⁰ Nor was the influence of this conviction confined to the ornamental dressing of theological language: it also helped to set limits to speculation. Theological inquiry should be limited to those things which can be and need to be known from scripture. Religious language should be edifying, and should build up the community's moral substance. Theologians should not condone 'curiosity'. Bullinger added, 'that which is not deliuered in the scriptures, can not without daunger be inquired after, but without daunger we may be ignoraunt thereof.'¹¹ That abstemiousness did not preclude even these early reformers from knowing and using their medieval scholastics, when it suited them to do so. However, they tried quite consistently to refrain from mere speculation and criticized it in others. A peculiar consequence of this self-denial manifested itself in the debates among reformers of the second or third generation. When debates arose over the legacy of (say) Luther or Calvin, it often proved very difficult to resolve certain kinds of questions conclusively from the earlier reformers' words. They had not aspired to the kind of technical precision which could provide the specific answers required.

Some such sense of dissatisfaction with the limitations of rhetorical, humanist-inspired theological language must have inspired the revival of scholastic language, techniques and concepts in reformed theology after c. 1580. Antoine de la Roche-Chandieu (1534–91) argued for a revived, repristinated scholastic theology in his *De Verbo Dei Scripto* of 1580.¹² In the last years of his life the Italian émigré Girolamo Zanchi (1516–90) revived a dialectical approach to dogmatic theology. In quite close parallel to Thomas Aquinas, he developed a dialectical systematic approach to theological topics. He included in his later

works a fairly substantive speculative metaphysics, seen for example in his *On the Works of God Created Within the Space of Six Days* (1591).¹³ Zanchi was fully prepared, as Calvin (for instance) had not been, to speculate on the limits to the learning capacities, knowledge and powers of angels and demons.

The return of scholastic techniques and formal logic entailed reopening questions which were familiar enough to the later Middle Ages, but which sat oddly in the Reformation. What German theologians used to refer to as ‘Als/ob theology’ – the theological exploration of questions about what *might* have happened if creation history had gone otherwise than it did – reappeared in the scholastic phase of Protestant thought.¹⁴ Would God have become incarnate even if Adam had not sinned? Theologians argued over what Calvin’s position on this question might have been, though, alas for them, he had not considered it worthwhile to give an unambiguous indication on the subject. Similarly, Protestant scholastics explored in meticulous detail the divine economy of the (supposedly very brief) period before the Fall. Federal theologians such as Herman Witsius (1636–1708) explored the workings of the covenant of works in Eden, making somewhat futile appeals to the authority of Calvin for their speculations.¹⁵

III

Meanwhile, Renaissance scholarly culture had not been static either. In the first decades of the movement, whether in early fifteenth-century Italy or rather later in the North, the focus had been upon restoring complete texts of classical authors. Such complete texts would facilitate understanding of the rhetorical traits and structure of an ancient author. From thorough internal understanding of the author’s voice would come new, engaging and persuasive rhetorical compositions. The latter would, it was hoped and assumed, assist in forming good citizens and responsibly devout Christians. This programme rested on a somewhat optimistic anthropology, and an even more optimistic estimate of the improving power of great oratory and great literature. As the sixteenth century progressed, the quest for better and better scholarly texts, and for philological precision of all

kinds, became an ideal in itself. In the age of highly learned scholar-philologists such as Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) and Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609), the quest for precision became largely its own reward. The awareness grew that the task of achieving scholarly accuracy was far, far more difficult than had been assumed in the heroic early phase of the movement.¹⁶

The scholarly quest for precision, pursued down the years at least in part for reasons of controversy and for the defence of the Reformation, in due course became the nemesis of Protestant visions of church history. It was in historical writing that the legacy of the early Renaissance had lasted longest within the heartlands of the Reformation. In the Swiss cities, reformers shaped by humanist education, especially Joachim Vadian of St Gallen, tried to craft a history of the Christian church which paid respect to the mixed motives of human beings. Vadian understood that not all religious history need be driven by dogmatic considerations; some things, such as monasticism, might begin with a good intent and only deteriorate over time.¹⁷ Across the putative divide between reformed and Lutheran Protestantism, Philipp Melanchthon and his son-in-law Kaspar Peucer made similar arguments on a much broader canvas. Through the revision of Johann Carion's *Chronica* (work which extended well beyond Melanchthon's own lifetime) they formed a discourse of church history which stressed the purity of the primitive church, and the gradual degradation of the church over time, through the perverse human introduction of spurious and unnecessary additions.¹⁸

However, over time, the pursuit of the perfect church in the church of the remote past proved to be a self-defeating exercise. For Joachim Vadian and Heinrich Bullinger, it seemed relatively easy to postulate a primitive form of the church where everything was conducted with the greatest possible simplicity and sincerity, and in conformity with Scripture. The predictable result was that these early humanistic reformed historians depicted a primitive church which looked very much like the reformed church of 1530s Switzerland. As time progressed, scholarly debates over the primitive church became more and more testy and acrimonious. Upholders of the traditional episcopate appealed to the letters (whether genuine or spurious) of Ignatius of Antioch (d. between 98 and 117): though Ignatius

was highly unusual for his time in his enthusiasm for monarchical episcopacy, one side treated him as normative for the entire church, while another disregarded or discredited him.¹⁹ Eventually, such self-defeating debates over the testimony of the primitive church could even divide reformed churches against themselves. Debates over the nature of the early church became particularly acute in England (where patristic authority had from the beginning seemed to weigh rather more heavily than elsewhere) over such issues as the appropriate forms of liturgy and, of course, of church government. Eventually, all that these debates over the historical church could demonstrate was that *no* modern church could correspond to, copy from or follow precisely the churches of the earliest centuries. The historical distance between one period and another could not be erased in this way.

IV

It has been observed that Western culture has manifested a certain tendency to oscillate from the Graeco-Roman classical cultural mode to the medieval Gothic, and back again, across the centuries since the Renaissance. One should not of course overplay this: the Middle Ages had a classicism of their own, and cycles of intellectual taste never simply replicate what has gone before. In Protestant theology, however, there was a natural tendency for the emphases in doctrine to oscillate between the speculative and the ethical. Both tendencies had been present from the start: but the ambiguities over the role of ‘good works’ ensured that instability would remain. With the passing of the bitter confessional conflicts of the seventeenth century, even in Scotland (which saw some of the last ‘wars of religion’ anywhere in Europe) there ensued in the eighteenth century a fairly rapid turning away from the confessional animosities and theoretical rigours that had wracked the country for many decades earlier. In some quarters of Scottish Presbyterianism, that turn away from dogma led to a questioning of even those doctrines which the reformers had never wished or dared to touch, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. A mitigated or moderated form of Unitarianism made some measure of headway in an Enlightenment Scotland which valued civic ethics and decency above doctrinal precision. Rightly or wrongly, the modern

descendants of eighteenth-century Socinians and Unitarians often look back to the Renaissance as their inspiration and vindication.

For myself, I could not conceive of a Christian theology which is *not* Trinitarian; not least because the Trinity, understood with some measure of theological creativity, appears in a most fundamental way to speak to and correspond to the human cosmic predicament, where the forces of creation and structure would be doomed to be locked in conflict with the phenomena of transience and vulnerability, were they not reconciled by the power of love.²⁰ Nevertheless, there is a dialectic in church history, which grows out of the effects of human fallibility and the human pursuit of secondary intentions. Human beings pursue one means to their primary aim of holiness of life, then after the exaggerated pursuit of that secondary objective, may suddenly turn against it and pursue another secondary aim altogether.²¹ It is as easy and dangerous to pursue too much of the fine print of doctrinal definition, as it is to pursue the ascetic life or the sacramental grace of endlessly repeated masses.

Church history requires us to migrate temporarily to an imagined other country, in order to understand its ways of thinking, but in the process also to retain a degree of detachment. One tries to recognize why something was a priority for people of another age, without subjecting oneself to their time-limited preferences and values. The church historian needs to retain a keen sense of where one comes from and where one belongs. It is, perhaps, a little like being a Scotsman in the United States of America. Over there one lives amidst a culture which is apparently familiar, yet remains deeply different on many levels. For handling that set of paradoxes and puzzles, as in so much else, my father James Cameron passed that way before me, and gave me a lead.

Notes

- ¹ James Kirk, ed., *Humanism and Reform: The Church in Europe, England and Scotland 1400–1643: Essays in Honour of James K. Cameron* (*Studies in Church History*, Subsidia 8; Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- ² Euan Cameron, “The Late Renaissance and the Unfolding Reformation in Europe”, in Kirk, *Humanism and Reform*, 15–36.
- ³ See e.g. Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform: From Wyclif to Erasmus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), with texts translated by James K. Cameron.
- ⁴ See e.g. *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1974–), vol. 66: *Spiritualia: Enchiridion; De Contemptu Mundi; De Vidua Christiana*, ed. John W. O’Malley (1988), 65.
- ⁵ A. Hay, *Ad reverendissimum in Christo patrem D. Iacobum Betoun, S. Andreae archipraesulem, Scotiae primatem, ac legatum natum, pro Collegii Ereptione Archibaldi Hayi, Oratio* (Paris, 1538); Euan Cameron, “Archibald Hay’s *Elegantiae*”, in *Acta Conventus Neolatini Turonensis: 3e Congrès international d’études néo-latines*, Tours, Université François-Rabelais, 6–10 Septembre 1976 (ed. Jean-Claude Margolin; 2 vols.; Paris: J. Vrin, 1980), 277–302.
- ⁶ A. Hay, *Ad illustrissimum tituli s. Stephani in monte Coelio cardinalem, d. Davidem Betoun, primatem Scotiae [...] de foelici accessione dignitatis cardinalitiae Gratulatorius Panegyricus Archibaldi Hayi* (Paris, 1540); on Hay see also Euan Cameron, “Hay, Archibald (d. 1547)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12709>, accessed 12 Feb 2012].
- ⁷ David Lyndsay, *Ane Dialog Betuix Experience and ane Courteour: Off the Miserabyll Estait of the Warld. Compylit be Schir David Lyndesay of ye Mont Knycht alias, Lyone Kyng of Armes [...]* (n.p.: Machabeus, [1554]) the sections headed “Off imageis usit among cristin men”, and “Exclamatioun aganis Idolatrie”, sigs. Giii^v ff.

- ⁸ Heinrich Bullinger, *De origine erroris libri duo: in priore agitur de Dei veri iusta invocatione & cultu vero, de Deorum item falsorum religionibus & simulachrorum cultu erroneo: in posteriore disseritur de institutione & vi sacrae Coenae domini, & de origine ac progressu Missae papisticae, contra varias superstitiones pro religione vera antiqua & orthodoxa* (Zurich: Froschauer, 1539), fols. 160^v–167^v.
- ⁹ James K. Cameron, “The Cologne Reformation and the Church of Scotland”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30 (1979): 39–64; on this topic see also Alec Ryrie, “Reform Without Frontiers in the Last Years of Catholic Scotland”, *English Historical Review* 119.480 (2004): 27–56.
- ¹⁰ For Luther’s humanism see Lewis William Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1996); also Timothy P. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther’s Early Correspondence: Taking All Things Captive* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); on Melancthon and rhetoric, see e.g. John R. Schneider, “Melancthon’s Rhetoric as a Context for Understanding His Theology” in *Melancthon in Europe: His Work and Influence Beyond Wittenberg* (ed. Karin Maag; Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1999), 141–59. On Calvin and rhetoric see e.g. Olivier Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole: étude de rhétorique réformée* (Bibliothèque littéraire de la Renaissance, Série 3, vol. 28; Geneva: Slatkine, 1992); Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
- ¹¹ Heinrich Bullinger, *Fiftie Godlie and Learned Sermons, Diuided into Fiue Decades* (London: [Henry Middleton for] Ralphe Newberrie, 1577), 733.
- ¹² See Donald Sinnema, “Antoine de Chandieu’s Call for a Scholastic Reformed Theology (1580)” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives* (ed. W. Fred Graham; Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 159–90.
- ¹³ Girolamo Zanchi, *De operibus Dei intra spacium sex dierum creatis* (Neustadt: Harnisius, 1591).

- ¹⁴ For this form of theology compare Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1983), 53.
- ¹⁵ Herman Witsius, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus, libri quatuor* (Leovardiae: Jacobus Hagenaar, 1677); compare Stephen R. Spencer, “Francis Turretin’s Concept of the Covenant of Nature” in Graham, *Later Calvinism*, 71–91. For a very different perspective on later Calvinism see e.g. Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁶ See above all the works of Anthony Grafton, especially his *Joseph Scaliger: A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship* (2 vols.; Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983–93).
- ¹⁷ See texts discussed in my forthcoming chapter, “Primitivism, Patristics, and Polemic in Protestant Visions of Early Christianity”, in *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World* (eds. Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield and Howard Louthan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27–51, esp. at 32–35.
- ¹⁸ Cameron, “Primitivism, Patristics, and Polemic”, 42–46 and references; compare also *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, article xxvii.
- ¹⁹ Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches’ Past* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 143 and references.
- ²⁰ See the sermon delivered two days after this paper, at <http://www.all-souls.ox.ac.uk/userfiles/file/Sermons/EC-190611.pdf>
- ²¹ Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History*, 58–102.