



The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century (Oxford-Warburg Studies)

Jean-Louis Quantin

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Today, the statement that Anglicans are fond of the Fathers and keen on patristic studies looks like a platitude. Like many platitudes, it is much less obvious than one might think. Indeed, it has a long and complex history. Jean-Louis Quantin shows how, between the Reformation and the last years of the Restoration, the rationale behind the Church of England's reliance on the Fathers as authorities on doctrinal controversies, changed significantly. Elizabethan divines, exactly like their Reformed counterparts on the Continent, used the Church Fathers to vindicate the Reformation from Roman Catholic charges of novelty, but firmly rejected the authority of tradition. They stressed that, on all questions controverted, there was simply no consensus of the Fathers. Beginning with the 'avant-garde conformists' of early Stuart England, the reference to antiquity became more and more prominent in the construction of a new confessional identity, in contradistinction both to Rome and to Continental Protestants, which, by 1680, may fairly be called 'Anglican'. English divines now gave to patristics the very highest of missions. In that late age of Christianity - so the idea ran - now that charisms had been withdrawn and miracles had ceased, the exploration of ancient texts was the only reliable route to truth. As the identity of the Church of England was thus redefined, its past was reinvented. This appeal to the Fathers boosted the self-confidence of the English clergy and helped them to surmount the crises of the 1650s and 1680s. But it also undermined the orthodoxy that it was supposed to support.

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