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REVIEW ARTICLE

DISPUTING THE CATHOLIC PAST (AND PRESENT)

The conciliarist tradition: constitutionalism in the Catholic Church, 1300–1870. By Francis Oakley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 (new edn 2008). Pp. 298. ISBN 978-0-9-926528-3. £78.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-954124-9. £24.00 (pb).

Art and identity in early modern Rome. Edited by Jill Burke and Michael Bury. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. Pp. xvi + 289. ISBN 978-0-7546-5690-6. £65.00.

Catholics writing the nation in early modern Britain and Ireland. By Christopher Highley. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. 231. ISBN 978-0-19-953340-4. £50.00.

The Catholic Church: a short history. By Hans Küng. London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001 (pb edn 2002). Pp. vii + 231. ISBN 0-297-64638-9. £6.99.

Disputed truth: memoirs II. By Hans Küng. Continuum, 2008. Pp. 576. ISBN 0-8264-9910-4. £30.00.

One of the most striking aspects of the history of the Catholic Church is the tenacity with which papal monarchy has become rooted to the institution's core identity, and remains central to popular (and unpopular) understandings of the nature of the institution. The pope has become almost entirely synonymous with the broader church in a way exponents of early modern absolutism could only have dreamed. In the seventeenth century, Louis XIV attempted to defy Roman jurisdiction over the French church in a drive towards reconciling the state and its ecclesiastical institutions in his own royal presence; in 1870, Pius IX could declare 'I, I am tradition, I, I am the Church!' with as much determination, and perhaps more accuracy than when the French king determined 'L'état, c'est moi.' Francis Oakley accepts this potentially apocryphal moment of papal self-definition as likely historical fact. In his study of conciliarism between the late medieval period and the late nineteenth century, with great adroitness, fluidity, and concision, Oakley considers the ways in which the conciliarists in the church argued against papal supremacy over the course of centuries, while their contribution to Catholic thought has been underestimated and neglected by later historians. The conciliarists argued that a general council could claim supremacy over papal authority, and frequently seemed on the cusp of transforming the

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nature of church government, only to be beaten back by papalists, a process which culminated in the eventual enshrinement of papal infallibility in the decrees of the First Vatican Council.

Oakley's book proceeds chronologically from the Great Schism of the fourteenth century, when three rival claimants for the papal tiara were all deposed by the Council of Constance, through the early modern period, when Bellarmine's writings successfully girded the intellectual arguments of papal supremacy. The final sections consider the modern period when, in the wake of the Napoleonic conflicts, papal government seemed destined never to be restored to its old glory. Instead, the nineteenth century gave birth to a far stronger papalism and a more conservative and reactionary Catholicism than in any preceding epoch. Oakley's book considers these events in a lucid analytical narrative which drives home the precarious position of papal authority in these centuries, emphasizing its extraordinary and relatively recent consolidation of power in the late nineteenth century, at the same time that it suffered, perhaps partly in consequence, the loss of direct temporal influence in the Italian peninsula.

Although Oakley's book has a strong linear narrative, its origins as a series of lectures peep through its structure – it emerges as a book of three parts, dealing with distinct chronological phases united by a common ecclesiological thread. Perhaps inevitably, the strongest aspects of his narrative are its earlier and final sections. The Great Schism and the First Vatican Council were the two events which most conspicuously opened the debate between papalists and conciliarists, and these moments provided most potential for a change in church government. The excitement of Oakley's account stems precisely from the latent potential of these moments; it is in this regard that his book is most successful. He argues that the eventual triumph of the papacy has undermined historical understandings of the nature of Catholic opposition to papal authority, but it is in the sections of his analysis where conciliarist ambitions seem ready to be fulfilled that Oakley's approach brings the argument alive by demonstrating the papacy's unlikely success in establishing itself as the defining component of the Catholic Church. In his account of the Great Schism, it seems at moments impossible to imagine that papal authority might win out against the conciliarists, and this construction of uncertainty, and emphasis on the exigency of historical developments, is one of the great strengths of Oakley's account.

One might assume that a history of conciliarism would inevitably be a study of political and ecclesiological thought, but what makes Oakley's contribution to the subject so important is the overview which he provides, linking the history of events with the history of ideas. In some respects, his account of early modern conciliarism is less interesting, despite the role played by Gallicanism in refuelling conciliarist debates. Perhaps it is simply because the papalist rottweiler Bellarmine so skilfully demolished the arguments put forward by Paolo Sarpi and his ilk, and remained the most influential exponent of papal supremacy for generations. It was in this period that the papacy allied itself with various temporal powers to consolidate its supremacy against the conciliarists, allowing

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monarchs greater influence over aspects of church government in their territories, at least until the rise of Gallican thought complicated the long-term pragmatism of this policy. It was the national interests of the French monarchy, rather than a reified intellectual or ecclesioloigcal understanding, which drove the temporary successes of seventeenth-century conciliarism.

The complex picture of Catholicism disunited emerging from Oakley's study reflects an aspect of the church's history that has recently become a vital subject for historians of Catholicism, particularly in the early modern period. It challenges the idea of a monolithic institution, instead favouring regional studies considering the variability of Catholic practice and culture in different nations and communities. Jill Burke and Michael Bury's collection of essays, *Art and identity in early modern Rome*, is the product of an AHRC-funded project, 'the court culture of early modern Rome' which seeks to explore and dissect the politico-ecclesiastical nature of the Catholic capital. The volume consists of twelve essays, spanning from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. It considers issues surrounding art, patronage, and the construction of personal, familial, and institutional reputations through the commission, creation, and purchase of visual and material culture. The essays vary in their methodological approach – some are pure art history and relatively (but not unnecessarily) technical, while others are genuinely interdisciplinary efforts which explore the interactions between political thought and practice, art, and religious contexts. What the collection reveals is the complexity of early modern Roman society, a city-state whose peculiar interactions between local, Italian, and international residents, and its status as capital of a global church, marked it out as a cosmopolitan metropolis which could also be amazingly parochial in its perspectives. It was perhaps this strange mixture of Roman, Italian, and broader Catholic cultures intersecting and interacting which gave early modern Rome its distinctive character. Certainly, its status as a melting pot for various diplomats, clerics, and visitors from across the world ensured that its cultural output was deeply influential and trend-setting, even in countries in which Catholics were not in the majority. At the beginning of the period considered in this book it was a Renaissance capital, attracting some of the leading patrons and artists, but 200 years later as the baroque period was drawing to an end, Rome remained the centrepiece of a revised and revitalized classicism.

At the core of this collection's understanding of personal, familial, and institutional 'identity' is awareness that 'popes, cardinals and other prelates were constantly called upon to negotiate potentially conflicting loyalties between the spiritual and the temporal, family and the Church, and, because most of them were not Roman by birth, between their native city and their adopted home'. Through the arts and cultural demonstrations, these essays argue, such contradictory impulses could be reconciled, or at least, the fissures could be bridged. It is clear from various essays in this collection, not least from the editors' introduction, that early modern Rome was a fragmented society filled with a multiplicity of complementary and competing courts, led by nobles, cardinals,

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diplomats, and, of course, the pope. Recognition of the last as the most senior figure in the city, even by ancient families who may have been age-old enemies of the incumbent's *familia*, recognized this supremacy – another indication of the security of papal authority in the early modern period. The strange thing about Rome's political and social structures was their complete fluidity. As each pope died and another elected, swathes of courtiers, ministers, and hangers-on fell from grace, as other groups were elevated to positions of power and influence. And yet, despite the relative frequency of these great political fluctuations (thirty-seven popes between 1417 and 1700), papal Rome was a remarkably stable polity, with resilient and enduring socio-political structures, despite sporadic food shortages and ensuing riots. In this context, this collection strongly suggests the primacy of culture in unifying the city. In its creation and commissioning, art allowed the elite to construct a series of coherent identities, to demonstrate the heritage of their families, their power, their wealth, and their commitment to their faith. Thus ostentatious display papers over the cracks of Rome's dynamic and precarious distribution of power and patronage, and somehow holds it together.

A cracked polity might serve as a very good description for the early modern British Isles. Interest in 'identity' has been at the core of historiographical developments in early modern British history in the last two decades. This is particularly true in relation to studies of the minority Catholic population which found itself increasingly identified by the suspicious Protestant majority as a community distinctly separate, criminal, alien, and other. The first question posed by Christopher Highley's book on early modern Catholic identity in the three kingdoms, *Catholics writing the nation in early modern Britain and Ireland*, is what nation? His title's separation of Britain from Ireland recognizes that, in a religious context, Catholic Ireland was demonstrably distinct from the Protestant motherland, although many of Highley's texts are the products of exiled British writers working on the Continent.

Highley's study is a further contribution to the list of works on British Catholicism which have appeared recently, and which rely heavily on textual analyses of individual case studies. The genre is in many ways a product of the New Historicist approach pursued in literary studies, and books of this nature have been at the forefront of early modern interdisciplinarity. Although they can often appear quite myopic – missing the broader picture for focusing on small textual arguments, particularly by ignoring the Continental and global contexts to British Catholicism, and risking rendering it something more distinctive than it really was – Highley's book is effective in elaborating on the importance of the European context. This is because the texts which he considers are mainly the products of authors who have already gone into Continental exile – in some ways, they have already lost. Like Oakley, he is concerned with the jarring consequences of the failure of memory, and the consequences of that failure among historians and their subjects. While Oakley rejects the way history has remembered and re-created conciliarism, Highley argues that British Catholics too have had a raw deal. From the sixteenth century onwards, Protestantism has been

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identified with good, loyal Britons, while Catholicism was the faith of fundamentally un-British traitors. Highley argues that early modern Catholics recognized the importance of this association, and strove to undermine it. He is convincing in making the case that proto-nationalist issues (for want of a better phrase) lay at the heart of many recusant efforts to secure toleration and support some kind of ecumenical settlement, particularly with the accession of James I. But as Highley demonstrates, the battle was already lost long before the Armada sailed, or home-grown Catholics decided the patriotic thing to do for their faith was blow up the king and his parliament. The battle of ideas, of the construction of Englishness and loyal subjecthood, was lost in the early days of Elizabeth's reign, most demonstrably when the legacy of Bloody Mary was used in Knox's martyrology to cement the terrifying violence and criminality inherent in Catholic identity. Even if modern historians have transformed understandings of Mary's reign, these current historiographical developments cannot re-write or minimize the lasting influence which the legacy of her reign bequeathed.

Highley's contention that the early modern Catholic writings he discusses are the product of a propaganda campaign intent on winning hearts and minds is fair, but as important is the concomitant suggestion that this (re-) writing of national identities was essentially reactionary. The texts which Highley discusses do not really seem to deal with the full consequences of their arguments – they do not engage with Catholicism as a multinational phenomenon, nor with divergent understandings of Catholicism and loyalty within the three kingdoms. They argue within the terms set by their opponents. Because anti-Catholic authors had been so successful at toeing the papalist line, and highlighting the centrality of papal monarchy to the church, it was difficult for Protestant contemporaries to believe British Catholics' espousal of loyalty to the monarch. It was difficult too for many British Catholics, whose loyalty was to church and pope, not to compromise their own faith through adherence to heretical monarchs. Highley quotes William Cecil's response to the demands of the Irish Catholic rebel, the earl of Tyrone, a marginal scribble – 'Ewtopia' – and in this one word captures the hopelessness of the irenicist agenda in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Although Oakley's and Highley's books are in ways about history's losers, it would be too simple to dismiss them in this way. They reflect the vitality of intellectual, political, and ecclesiological discourses within the Catholic Church, and national Catholic communities. While the cultural and artistic commissioning which built early modern Rome may have been identified with Catholic decadence, it also solidified a sense of what the Catholic Church represented in the counter-reformation period; it captured a tone for the church which resonated among friend and foe. The construction of early modern Rome represented a project to build a temporal capital worthy, indeed coherent with and inducive to, the church's spiritual designs. In this sense, Hans Küng's recent criticism that 'the Catholic Church's highly praised contribution to Western culture is inextricably bound up with a worldly nature and a deviation from its own spiritual tasks' is unfair. They were certainly inextricably connected, but not

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necessarily to the detriment of the church's spiritual agenda – the creation of beauty, especially sanctified Christian beauty, remains central to Catholicism's understanding of material worship. That suspicion of material corruption is one aspect of Küng's bittersweet history of the church, which praises its successes while polemically assessing its worldliness from the perspective of a disappointed believer. Küng's role as one of the leading conciliarists of the twentieth century leads him to espouse his own view of church government in the introduction to his short overview of Catholicism's institutional history: 'I affirm the papacy for the Catholic Church, but at the same time indefatigably call for a radical reform of it in accordance with the criterion of the gospel.' His book is framed by his conciliarist perspective, but none the worse for that. It has a contemporary resonance normally lacking in such historical writings.

If Oakley's account of conciliarism might suggest the death knell for anti-papal Catholic theologians, all of these books recognize the historical complexity of Catholic history, a history in which ideas never really die (as befits a church which claims timeless traditional precedent), and in which Catholics and their writings continue to exert tremendous influence, and not necessarily only within the safe confines of academia. As the most significant conciliarist in the post-Vatican II church, it is not surprising that Küng makes a sustained effort to combat the lingering notions of papal supremacy as inherent to church government. As one of the leading advocates of ecumenism, his thoughts on modern Catholic attitudes towards Protestants and non-Christians delivered in the second volume of his autobiography, can be read with great interest in application to the earlier history of the church too. Its title, *Disputed truth*, serves not only as a comment on the Catholic Church in the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, but is also suggestive of the rank disagreements within the historical church and among historians. It encapulates Rome's tremendous success in disputing the disputation of its own diverse, rancorous, and far from unitary history.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, SELWYN COLLEGE E. L. DEVLIN

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