Contested Reformations in the University of Cambridge, 1535-1584

Review Number: 2278

Publish date: Thursday, 6 September, 2018

Author: Ceri Law

ISBN: 9780861933471

Date of Publication: 2018

Pages: 235pp.

Publisher: Royal Historical Society

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Francis Young

Virtually every major male figure involved in England's reformations was a product of one of England's two universities, and biographers rightly recognise the importance of understanding people's careers at Oxford and Cambridge to their later lives. Yet the institutional history of the universities themselves, especially Cambridge, has been neglected. Ceri Law's *Contested Reformations in the University of Cambridge* corrects that oversight. The book is a much-needed history of the impact of the English Reformation on Cambridge University; as such, it makes a hugely significant contribution to the historiography of the Tudor reformations as well as the history of academia. The book is essential reading not just for those interested in Cambridge or the impact of the reformation on universities, but for all studying the English Reformation, because the universities were 'particularly important ideological battlefields' during this period (p. 7).

Law sets out to challenge the persistent myth of 'Protestant Cambridge' (p. 4) as the cradle and seedbed of the English Reformation, presenting a far more nuanced picture of a complex institution (the collegiate university) that responded in a variety of ways to religious pressure from on high. The timeliness and significance of Law's book is evident from the fact that it is the first sustained attempt to consider the impact of the Reformation on Cambridge in 60 years; as Law observes, the revisionist historians of the 1980s and 1990s passed Cambridge by, in spite of the centrality of England's two universities to the process of reform (p. 5). Law's study finally brings the history of the University of Cambridge into the mainstream of Reformation historiography and corrects a rather astonishing oversight by earlier generations of scholars.

Law's book begins with the traditional perception of Cambridge, derived initially from John Foxe, that the university was the 'cradle of reformation' in the 1520s, focusing especially on the university's entanglement with reformation controversies and the state between 1535 and 1547. The second chapter deals with the Edwardian reformation in Cambridge, before Law goes on to consider the fascinating period of the Marian restoration of Catholicism in the university. The fourth chapter tackles the reinstatement of Protestantism in the early years of Elizabeth's reign (to 1564), before Law goes on to consider the establishment of patronage, control and religious order in the years up to 1584. The final two chapters reflect on the survival of religious conservatism and the process of religious change in the Elizabethan period.

Law challenges the notion, sometimes received from histories of the reformation, that the university was merely a location for intellectual debate. She notes the existence of 'a communal identity that could transcend, or at least nuance, the narrative of confessional conflict' (p. 2). Because the university must be approached as a community (and a collection of smaller communities, the colleges), the famous set-piece

religious confrontations of 16th-century Cambridge need to be 'situated within slower, quieter stories of religious change', such as the re-ordering of chapels and the changing fortunes of academics of different theological persuasions within the university (p. 6).

Because they have hitherto been sidelined, Law's account pays particular attention to conservative voices in Tudor Cambridge. The Cambridge she portrays was a place simultaneously enthralled by the debates of the reformation yet anxious to preserve the illusion of an academic enclave insulated from direct exercises of political and ecclesiastical power. Yet the grisly fate of two of the university's chancellors, John Fisher and Thomas Cromwell, was a reminder that Cambridge was thoroughly entwined in affairs of state (p. 17). Law argues that the longstanding notion of 'Lutheran Cambridge' in the 1520s must be balanced against the powerful refutations of Lutheranism that also emerged from the university (p. 23). She makes the case that change began to be imposed on the university in 1529, when Stephen Gardiner was tasked with ensuring that Cambridge issue a ruling on the legality of a man's marriage to his dead brother's wife (the 'King's Great Matter'), a judgement that was not reached without negotiation and compromise (pp. 24–7).

Cambridge, like all other ecclesiastical institutions, subsequently became subject to visitation by Thomas Cromwell. The sticking point this time was humanist changes to the curriculum, which Cromwell's visitors Thomas Legh and John ap Rice attempted to impose in 1535. Law links opposition to the curriculum reforms with religious as well as pedagogical conservatism (p. 29). The university, which had received numerous papal grants over the years, underwent its own institutional break with Rome, which was finally completed in 1537 when Henry re-granted Cambridge's papal privileges by his own authority (p. 31). Another significant change came with the dissolution of the town's religious houses, hitherto an integral part of the university, although Law notes that some of these houses were already moribund, and not all of the friars were opponents of reform (p. 32).

Religious disputes within the Henrician university did not always occur directly, but sometimes under the cover of proxy arguments – a notable example being Stephen Gardiner's attack on a new pronunciation of Greek in 1542 (pp. 38–9), which gave Gardiner the opportunity to attack Humanist learning and the reformist ideas associated with it. With the accession of Edward VI, however, the gloves came off and a determined effort was made to construct a Protestant university. Law uses a wide range of evidence, from wills of academics to inventories of books and evolving college statutes, to trace the process of reform in Edward's reign, and challenges the 'implied or explicit comparison to the strength of Catholicism in Oxford' that has led scholars to see Cambridge as a resolutely 'Protestant' university (p. 44). Although Law is too circumspect to say so, the underlying root of such assumptions may have been the witting or unwitting projection of 19th-century religious characteristics of the two universities back on the 16th century.

Law shows that, while the impact of reformers such as Martin Bucer is undeniable, there was also a strong strand of conservatism and religious intransigence among the senior members of the university. She shows that the master of Trinity, John Redman, was a key figure who guided the consciences of more conservative academics. A 'Henrician Catholic' content to accept the royal supremacy but doctrinally conservative, Redman embodied the ethic of bare conformity that characterised many clergy during Edward's reign (pp. 54–6). A more strenuous opponent of reform was John Young, who directly attacked evangelicals in his preaching (pp. 58–9). However, the Edwardian reformation in Cambridge was characterised by formal compliance rather than an enthusiastic embrace of new ideas; even the destruction of images and altars was usually carried out within a strict legal framework, and under licence (p. 61). Certainly, the Protestant university that some hoped for had not materialised by the end of Edward's reign (p. 64).

Cambridge found itself at the centre of events as the Earl of Northumberland and Mary Tudor jostled for control of the kingdom in July 1553; Northumberland mustered his army at Cambridge with the intention of marching on Mary and her East Anglian supporters, and the city might have been the scene of civil war if Northumberland had not conceded defeat. As it was, the academics of the university were 'literally at each other's throats' that summer, with the vice-chancellor pulling a knife on his colleagues (p. 65). Law's account of Marian Cambridge builds on the important work of Eamon Duffy in *Fires of Faith: Catholic*

England under Mary Tudor (1), but here as elsewhere, Law offers a slightly more nuanced account that highlights continuing confessional complexity. While the Counter Reformation of the university was a faster and smoother process than either the imposition of the Edwardian or Elizabethan Reformations, the marks left by Edward's reign could not be eliminated, nor was it possible to re-set the clock to the pre-Reformation university (pp. 66–7). Law draws attention to the confusing situation in the early months of Mary's reign, when royal injunctions commanded the celebration of mass yet the royal supremacy and the liturgical settlement of 1552 remained unrepealed (p. 71). As in the reigns of her predecessors, academics in Mary's reign were anxious to act lawfully rather than determined to fulfill the queen's pleasure by any means.

We know more about Cardinal Pole's 1557 visitation of Cambridge University than any other Tudor university visitation, owing to the survival of two detailed contemporary accounts (p. 75). Law emphasises the sheer theatricality of the most notorious Cambridge event of Mary's reign, the exhumation and burning of the bodies of Martin Bucer and Paul Fagius, which was attended by ceremonies of re-consecration for the churches of St Mary the Great and St Michael as well as ceremonial book burnings (pp. 76–8). The performance of orthodoxy in physical acts was central to the Marian reaffirmation of Catholicism, with injunctions demanding corporate participation in worship down to specific bodily gestures (p. 81). However, Law also suggests that the Marian counter-reformation may have been theatrical in other ways; although we have evidence for several episodes of book burning, it is far from clear where these books came from, and there is little evidence for the actual confiscation of unorthodox books from academics (p. 79). Law shows through detailed quantitative analysis that all was not as it seemed in another area of the university's life: there was no mass exodus of Protestant scholars from the university in Mary's reign, and the departure of many academics can be accounted for by their appointment to other positions in the Marian church (pp. 83–9). Law emphasises the vital importance of conformity to the achievement of Counter Reformation within the university: although planned from without by Pole, the restoration of Catholicism within Cambridge was carried out by its own personnel rather than individuals newly appointed by Pole (p. 98).

Law is one of the first scholars to engage with the history of the university in the early years of Elizabeth's reign (1558–64), and she makes a compelling case for the critical importance of this period (p. 100). The most striking feature of the early Elizabethan reformation in the university was its laxity; conservative figures were often allowed to continue in office even when, like Andrew Perne, they had been publicly involved with the Marian regime. Law suggests two possible reasons for this laxity: either it was too difficult to attempt a wholesale replacement of senior figures in the university, or colleges were deliberately left 'unpurged' out of fear that colleges dominated by enthusiastic evangelicals posed a danger in their own right (p. 121). On this reading, conservatives were the leaven that ensured the success of the Elizabethan religious settlement. Like her predecessors, Elizabeth prioritised institutional conformity over enthusiasm for a particular theology. As time went on, it was not so much that the university became more Protestant, but that the 'Elizabethan state' increasingly exercised control, patronage and influence over an institution hitherto considered part of the church (p. 123). Yet here, once again, Law presents a more nuanced picture, arguing that what have sometimes been seen as 'state interventions' in Cambridge's affairs are often better understood as acts of patronage by powerful individuals in the regime rather than acts of centralising power. One consequence of such acts of patronage is that they created a space for more radical Protestants to thrive (pp. 139–40).

Law is the first scholar to tackle the fascinating issue of religious conservatism and Catholic intransigence within the university in Elizabeth's reign, an issue that has been dealt with before in college histories but never for the university as a whole. Her approach is to identify key figures who defied the Elizabethan religious settlement in a conservative direction: John Sanderson, Philip Baker, John Caius, Thomas Legge and Richard Swale. The last three were fellows of Gonville and Caius College, an institution that proved particularly problematic and resistant to conformity and was described as an 'asylum papisticum'. It is perhaps unsurprising that, as late as 1582, Caius College was still 'something approaching a Catholic seminary' (p. 149), given that the college was re-founded in Mary's reign by the theologically recalcitrant John Caius. However, while Law's analysis ascribes the glee with which students of the college burned Dr Caius's Catholic ornaments in 1572 to religious differences, Michael Pritchard's recent appraisal of Caius's

administration of the college suggests that it may have been Caius's minutely obsessive governance of every aspect of college life – his 'preposterous government' – that won him no friends among his students.

Law draws attention to the remarkable survival of aspects of Catholicism within the university for decades after Elizabeth's accession, which might take the form of openly expressed theological deviance (Sanderson's 'popish' sermon on fasting, for instance). More often, however, Catholic dissent took the form of students and fellows avoiding sermons and evading communion, or, like Philip Baker, insisting that Protestant services should resemble the mass as much as possible (p. 145). Others, like Caius, retained collections of Catholic ritual ornaments. While acknowledging that our information is very incomplete, Law attempts a quantitative analysis of the extent of Catholic non-conformity via the number of ex-Cambridge students who trained for the priesthood at seminaries abroad. This analysis permits the identification of certain colleges – such as Caius, Jesus and Peterhouse – that were often 'safe havens' for those with conservative leanings (p. 158). Law connects the prominence of Caius College as a haven for Catholics to its Yorkshire connections (p. 159), but she might have noted that the college's close links with the notoriously recusant gentry of Norfolk and Suffolk were also an important factor.

Law's pioneering analysis of conservative recidivism in Elizabethan Cambridge reveals a small but persistent problem for the authorities, and gives the lie to the historic perception of Oxford as the 'Catholic' university, while Cambridge was 'untouch'd' by conservatism. Law argues convincingly that William Cecil's rebukes to Oxford, comparing it unfavourably to the conformity of Cambridge, should be seen as a rhetorical device rather than a statement of the facts (pp. 160–2). More importantly, however, Law shows that Cambridge conservatism was not an isolated phenomenon, and more than mere 'coterie retreatism'; the Catholics of Elizabethan Cambridge, although few in number, were connected with Continental centres of the counter-reformation such as Louvain (pp. 162–3). Although omitted from Law's account, it is surely significant that one of the earliest seminary priests captured in England, Montford Scott, was apprehended in Cambridge trying to convert scholars in 1578.

Law identifies an unhelpful fallacy in the previous historiography of the university – the assumption that because Cambridge produced graduates of a particular theological stripe, that theology dominated the university. Yet close examination of Cambridge's institutional history shows that this was not the case, since the views of senior figures mattered far more to the character of the university than the enthusiasms of undergraduates. It was the men who made their careers in the university who left their mark upon it. Yet it is Law's central contention that 'religious unity in Cambridge was and remained beyond the power of those who sought to control the university both from without and within' (pp. 187–8). The embarrassing failure of successive regimes to impose conformity on the more tractable of England's universities surely speaks to the intellectual poverty of a religious settlement founded on awkward compromise. Intriguingly, Law hints at potential continuity between the recidivists of the 1570s and 1580s in Gonville and Caius and the beginnings of the anti-Puritan reaction that would end in Arminianism and the Laudian reaction; it was William Barrett, a fellow of Caius, who preached the first major sermon denouncing Calvinist soteriology in Cambridge in 1595 (p. 186).

Contested Reformations in the University of Cambridge offers a novel approach to the history of the University of Cambridge, as well as a new and valuable perspective on the English Reformation. It is compellingly argued, exceptionally well-written and an indispensable addition to the historiography of the English reformation.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven, CT, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author thanks Dr Young for his thorough and generous review and is happy to accept it.

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298481>