

Britain, Hanover and the Protestant Interest, 1688-1756

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In this intellectually stimulating book Andrew C. Thompson criticises a realist interpretation of British foreign policy. His main argument runs that eighteenth-century foreign policy 'was not simply determined either by the desire for profit or territorial gain. It was part of a complex web of ideas that were intimately related to a broader political culture' (p. 2). Thompson suggests that 'Protestant interest' was a vital part of eighteenth-century political culture and, thus, an important aspect in the debate about foreign policy. In order to demonstrate the impact of the Protestant interest on political thinking Thompson examines British foreign policy in Europe with a special focus on the Old Reich, the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, from the Glorious Revolution to the Seven Years' War. Three controversial topics are conjointly discussed: religion as an argument in foreign policy, Britain's continental commitment during a period of intensive colonial expansion and Britain's role on the continent in the light of the Personal Union with the Electorate of Hanover.

Thompson's central thesis is based on three highly convincing assumptions. First, he argues for a period of transition from an age of confessional divide to the time of the Enlightenment. He writes: 'Just as catholic rulers did not suddenly decide in 1648 to accept the end of Christendom and the birth of a new community of states, as a historical international relations theory implies, neither did persecution by catholic rulers suddenly cease in 1700 because it was now the century of enlightenment' (p. 41). Rather than 1648 he posits the accession of Frederick II of Prussia in 1740 as a watershed in the impact of the Protestant interest on political negotiating. Thompson's criticism of 'a noticeable reluctance to let religion and politics mix in the period after 1648' understands historians as 'trapped by their own notions of periodisation' (p. 67). Thompson convincingly demonstrates that confessional motivation was not anachronistic for enlightened contemporaries.

Despite this first assumption Thompson does not argue for strict continuity between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Instead, in his second assumption, religion is presented as a vital element of foreign policy, although, at the same time, he accepts that the confessional divide did not play as obvious a role as it had during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, this transformation in the nexus between religion and political thought does not undermine his overall argument. Instead, it gives a flexibility to his interpretation that makes it more convincing. As he writes: 'The protestant interest does not provide a "total"

explanation of foreign policy in the period. Yet analysing it indicates how debates about foreign policy were conducted' (p.132). This is an important reservation. Although the changes discussed are not understood to be from a religious age to an enlightened period, Thompson still emphasises that he does not generally question a transformation in the nature of policy-making. The defence of the Protestant interest played a crucial role and it is the aim of the book to identify that role and the nature of its historical transformation: 'If there had been a shift away from war as the best means to further religious ends, the shift was not from zeal to scepticism but rather a change in the nature of the means through which it was thought that Protestantism could best be defended' (p. 96).

Thompson does not argue that the eighteenth century still saw military conflict purely over confessional claims. Instead, he identifies confessional arguments in the ideological framework of contemporary politicians and diplomatists. In this context, he is certainly right in pointing out that the majority of decision-makers during the reigns of George I and George II grew up in a period of intense confessional divide. This argument leads to his third assumption, that politicians and diplomatists were part of contemporary society, sharing common world views and beliefs. Thompson writes: 'Statesmen may have considered strategy and territorial gain more carefully than those less "in the know". Yet politicians (and the elite more generally) were not immune to wider patterns of thought. There is no straight opposition between religious/ethical and practical/pragmatic concerns' (p. 89). Thus, the book examines the link between political culture and political decision-making through a discussion of the defence of Protestantism as a foreign-political argument from 1688 to 1756.

Thompson's empirical work is based on three case studies. In his account of British and Hanoverian responses to the crisis between Catholics and Protestants in the German city of Heidelberg from 1719 to 1724 he demonstrates how the struggle between the Catholic Elector Carl Philip and the reformed Protestants in the Palatinate over sharing a church in the capital was perceived by a European public and followed by severe diplomatic rows in the German Reich and Europe. The shift away from ideological warfare of an earlier period did not extinguish the confessional characteristics that shaped politics and policies just as much as society and statesmen. In his second example, the Thorn crisis of 1724-7, Thompson examines how the execution of a (disputed) number of Protestants, although fewer than 15, in a Polish town in eastern Prussia also ended in a European crisis. His third case study, the War of the Polish Succession, is slightly different. It does not focus on a confessional conflict that expands into a political crisis. Instead, the link between confessional and German politics in a European context is emphasised. As Thompson points out: 'Regardless of what British ministers thought personally, electoral affairs inevitably meant that it was necessary to be aware of confessional politics in the Empire' (p. 177). The latter explains why Hanover plays such a prominent role in the book. Many of the decisions taken in the context of European foreign policy, one of the few prerogatives of the early Georgian monarchs, were executed by them not as kings of Great Britain and Ireland but as Electors of Hanover. Thus, many of the controversies over confession were overlooked by British historians as they did not give sufficient consideration to this Hanoverian dimension in British foreign policy.

The book has many strengths. Its main asset is to question a periodisation that does not allow for a time of transition or change. Thompson's approach permits emphasis to be placed on continuities and change. In what can be termed a more cultural school of political history he emphasises contemporary perceptions over realist argument. As he points out: 'Irrespective of whether the papacy or the Jesuits were plotting the destruction of Protestantism, the "fact" that they were perceived to be so doing affected the attitudes and policies of officials in both Britain and Hanover'. It is less the actual threat from Catholicism that becomes the major focus of his interpretation than stereotypical images of a Catholic menace and the consequences that follow from it: 'Lack of good faith was a characteristic that protestants particularly associated with catholic princes' (p. 57).

While the book thus follows the more recent changes in the interpretation of politics towards a culturalist explanation, it is more revisionist in a different aspect. Thompson's understanding of empire does not exclude Britain's European interests. He clearly criticises an interpretation of British history that sees its

colonial expansion as the dominant interest in eighteenth-century foreign policy. Historical analysis that focuses exclusively on Britain's 'blue water' policy underestimates the importance of continental affairs to British governments of the day. Thompson writes: [A]s well as being an Atlantic, and increasingly in the eighteenth century an imperial, power, Britain had, through dynastic links, a European identity as well'. Thompson argues that a focus on aspects of empire should not exclude a discussion of British commitment to Europe: 'Instead of simply thinking about New British History, the insights provided by thinking of Britain as a composite state or multiple monarchy with a European aspect provide a more fruitful context for British history in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (p. 236). Thompson's Hanoverian or continental findings are very important and offer a fresh interpretation of British foreign policy of the period. To some extent, they underpin the most important arguments of the book.

The book's particular strength also lies in its mastery of the intricacies of German Reichspolitik, combining it with a discussion of British involvement via and opposed to Hanoverian interests. Thompson skilfully blends the different layers of his analysis into a highly readable narrative. It is impressive how he finds his way from the interpretation of the intricacies of confessional debate in a south German market town to the mechanics of European foreign policy. As he puts it: 'What had begun as a dispute about a book and a church had become entwined with bigger issues' (p. 76).

While Thompson's interpretations of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century foreign policy deserve praise and seem fully justified, there are two major reservations regarding his approach. First, many of the arguments fail to reach a positive conclusion. Thompson asks the right questions but his study does not provide many answers. Despite his detailed analysis it is extremely difficult to pin down where and, particularly, how religion had an impact on policy-making. While he is certainly right in stressing the importance of a confessional divide and the more general argument of a 'Protestant interest', particularly in his first two case studies, it remains almost impossible to draw specific conclusions in a broader European context. This is something of which Thompson is aware:

It has often been assumed that religion was unimportant to foreign policy because it is difficult to point to situations where religion alone can be said to have determined policy. This negative, in terms of results, should not be taken at face value. Ideas and assumptions were also important, even though they are less easy to reconstruct than a simple chronology of decisions and actions (p. 235).

Still, the picture that Thompson paints remains somehow vague as it proves impossible to reconstruct the ideological elements in foreign policy beyond the fact that the Protestant interest mattered.

This is further undermined by a degree of ambivalence in the individual behaviour of his main protagonists, the Hanoverian monarchs. Regarding the religious beliefs of the first two Georges, Thompson writes: 'While George III remained faithful to his wife, the gifts showered upon their mistresses by George I and II were notorious. Hence, it is often believed that neither George I nor George II was personally religious' (p. 5). Thompson admits that in most cases the monarch proved less zealous in defending the Protestant interest than the overall argument of the book implies, but he still thinks it fair to argue the importance of religion to both George I and George II. With regard to the former he writes: 'George disliked religious war but he would not flinch from taking firm action, if forced, to defend legitimate protestant rights' (p. 84). The degree to which Protestantism was used by the monarch varied: 'French power declined after Louis XIV's death. George I stressed protestant unity in the 1720s because one of his key diplomatic adversaries was now catholic Austria. Relations with Austria improved after 1740 so it seemed less opportune for George II to stress confessional difference' (p. 188). This, again, seems to imply that religious motivation played less of a role in determining the outcome of policy than Thompson's hypothesis would have us believe. He is certainly right in stressing that the 'Grand Alliance, even with catholic members, could function as a protestant shield', but whether this was presented as such to justify foreign political decisions or whether it had a direct impact and in what form remains unclear. Thompson states: [T]here is a tendency to minimise

the importance of the confessional issue by turning it into a mask for the ambition of an individual' (p. 66).

Thompson tries to avoid the difficulties arising from the monarch's lack of personal piety by focusing on two aspects. First, he makes it clear that it was often not the promotion of Protestantism but anti-Catholicism that provided the stronger motivation. And second, he stresses that next to the monarch we find a number of highly religious courtiers:

George Ludwig or George I as he became had a good claim to be regarded as a viable Fidei Defensor. He had shown confessional concern in local disputes and engaged in protestant politics within the Empire. Moreover George's court contained such figures as Robethon and Bernstorff. Both had strongly anti-catholic views (p. 60).

The latter argument becomes more illuminating if we consider the reservation of Uriel Dann, who noted 'the tension between largely free-thinking British whig nobles and their deeply religious Hanoverian counterparts' (p. 218).

Still, the personal attitudes of the monarch remain problematic to Thompson's analysis, particularly if we consider the changes in political culture from George I to George II: 'A sense of protestant solidarity was more common in the period of the wars against Louis XIV. By the 1740s a strong strand of English exceptionalism and superiority had appeared - the modern English, like the ancient Hebrews, enjoyed a special relationship with the Almighty' (p. 12). With the more complex ideological construction of 'English exceptionalism', Protestant interest did not disappear, but to the modern historian it becomes even more difficult to identify. The lack of an analytical tool to pinpoint the meaning of religious and confessional arguments makes some of the findings very difficult to apply generally. This becomes yet more apparent in Thompson's interpretation of the period after the accession of Frederick II of Prussia: 'As the final chapter indicates, the rise of Prussia after 1740 complicated matters. Before that, popery and universal monarchy went hand in hand' (p. 39). With the accession of the young Prussian king, however, more conflicting and competing images of monarchical rule dominated within the political sphere in Europe. While the idea of a Protestant hero defending religion did not disappear and the Protestant fears of Catholic attempts at universal monarchy survived, stereotypical images were less suited to explain the more complex situation on the continent. Frederick's secular views stressed the difficulty in applying a confessional paradigm to politics. Again, Thompson is aware of this development: 'The War of the Austrian succession caused considerable problems for attempts to conceptualise international relations within either a protestant interest framework or within a revived view of the Old System' (p. 204). However, the reservation by itself does not solve the overall problem that for the earlier period, but more particularly for the time after 1740, Protestant interest cannot be ruled out as an element in foreign policy but its significance cannot be adequately discussed.

The second reservation is related to the first and is one of emphasis only. The major findings of the book are less concerned with defence of the Protestant interest. Much more, the evidence produced illustrates the interdependencies between British and Hanoverian policies. While the general hypothesis of Protestant interest as an argument in foreign policy remains, though convincing, only a counterweight to a realist interpretation, the detailed analysis of the close co-operation between British and German ministers on German and European affairs illustrates the importance of Britain's continental interests. British political culture was influenced by Hanoverian political culture. Protestantism comes in as German policies at Regensburg were still largely defined in confessional terms. Thus, both British and Hanoverian policies were strongly determined by Protestant views, particularly with regard to the Reichspolitik. That Britain cared about what went on at the Imperial Diet in Regensburg is something that has long been denied by historiography. In this respect Thompson is much more revisionist in Europeanising British history than in his claim that there was an ideological element in political decision-making. To conclude, this is an important book about foreign policy although, to some extent, its emphasis on ideology overshadows its contribution to Britain's European history.

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