HISTORICAL STUDIES

"So Natural Is the Union of Religion with Justice": Hooker's Defense of Religious Establishment

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Abstract

One of the greatest contributions of Anglican theology has been its consistent defense of the value of public religious establishment, and the classic defense remains that of Richard Hooker in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593–1600). In the opening chapters of Book V of the *Laws*, Hooker offers a compelling argument that religion is a crucial support to a well-ordered and virtuous polity while seeking to forestall the objection that this "instrumentalizes" religion to merely political ends. He also acknowledges the generic value of any kind of public religion while nonetheless contending that the wise ruler must choose that religion that is *true*, namely, Christianity. Hooker's defense of religious establishment remains relevant in a Western world coming to terms with the contradictions of secular pluralism.

Keywords

Anglicanism, religious establishment, public religion, Richard Hooker, civic virtue, justice

I. *Defining Establishment*

Although the Anglican Communion may be fast losing its distinctiveness amid the universal acids of individualism, globalism, and multiculturalism—not to mention sometimes ill-conceived ecumenical endeavors—its rich theological tradition still has many unique gifts to offer the modern church. Among these is its long defense of the value of public religious establishment, a notion that seems quaint to modern ears, if not downright noxious.

To be sure, Anglican churches are no longer likely to be established churches. The Episcopal Church of the United States was disestablished in the majority-Anglican states almost immediately after its formation in the wake of the Revolutionary War. The Anglican Church in Australia was disestablished in 1836, and in Canada, all provinces had ended their establishments by the time of Canadian independence in 1867. The Church of England still clings to its formal status as an established church, but perhaps for not much longer.[1]

And, of course, if Anglican churches need not be established churches, neither are established churches necessarily Anglican. In the wake of the Reformation, most Lutheran territorial churches enjoyed a similarly privileged relationship with the state, and this was even true more often than not of Calvinist churches—though these latter establishments tended to be more fraught, given the tendencies of Calvinist ecclesiology. Moreover, Roman Catholicism has been established by law in many countries, and still is in a few, although given its international character, the Catholic Church can never be a state church in the same sense as Protestant national churches can be.

Finally, it should be noted that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of state religious establishment. Established religions can run the gamut from strict uniformity to a modest privileging of one denomination. At one end of the spectrum, a particular church can be legally established to the exclusion of all others, such that any religious gathering by another sect is *ipso facto* illegal. At the other end of the spectrum, a society may practice complete religious toleration and simply favor its national church with special public acknowledgment, using its churches for state occasions and

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[1] For a good chronicle and analysis of these developments within the international Anglican Communion, see Bruce N. Kaye, *The Rise and Fall of the English Christendom: Theocracy, Christology, Order, and Power* (London: Routledge, 2018). For a more theological account, see Paul Avis, *Church, State, and Establishment* (London: SPCK, 2001).

granting its leadership formal representation in the government. The Church of England has, over its long history, moved incrementally from the maximalist pole of establishment to the minimalist pole. Historically, establishment has perhaps most often entailed state financial support, whether through general tax revenues or legally mandated tithes, but this is not necessary, nor is it currently the case in the Church of England.

These distinctions, in any case, are beyond the scope of this essay. For our purposes, it suffices to say that the tradition of religious establishment bears witness to two convictions: First, *the civil and natural ends of human society cannot be fully and properly achieved without explicit public acknowledgment and approval of the religious and supernatural ends of human life*. Second, because religions make particular and in some measure exclusive claims, *this public acknowledgment must take the form of a specific privileging of a specific visibly organized religious tradition*. As noted above, Anglicanism is hardly unique in making these claims; indeed, it might plausibly be argued that in this broad sense, some kind of religious or quasi-religious establishment is almost unavoidable, even when a society pretends to neutrality. However, we can certainly say that since its inception, the Anglican tradition has borne especially consistent witness to these claims and penned some of the most profound and eloquent defenses of them—from the earliest documents of the Church of England in the 1530s to T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* in 1939[2] and beyond.

In what follows, I will focus attention on perhaps the most seminal and influential defense of religious establishment in the Anglican tradition, that of Richard Hooker in his magisterial *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1593–1600).[3] Since from one perspective the entirety of the eight-book *Laws* is dedicated to this topic, I will limit my study for the most part to Hooker's most explicit discussion of the philosophical foundations of religious establishment, which occupies chapters 1 and 2 of Book V, published in 1597. While religious establishment is often thought of (and critiqued) in terms of the dependence of the church upon the state, in these chapters, Hooker frames it in the opposite direction, offering a powerful argument for establishment as the state's acknowledgment of its dependence upon the church. Hooker is

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2 T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society*, in *Christianity and Culture: The Centenary Edition, 1888–1988* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 1–77.

3 Throughout, I will make use of the classic Folger Library edition but will modernize spelling and punctuation for easier reading, including the spelling of the title, which was originally published as *The Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*. Citations will be given parenthetically by book, chapter, and section (e.g., V.1.2), followed by a page citation to the Folger Library Edition (e.g., *FLE* 2:20).

alive to the concern that this relationship could instrumentalize the church, justifying a kind of Machiavellian co-optation of the church as a prop to the cynical ambitions of the powerful. However, he goes on to show why, in his view, any civil religion that cynically discounts the actual truth claims of the church it establishes is bound to be self-defeating. The result is a compelling argument for the intimate relation of religion and justice, man's natural and supernatural ends, that undergirded many of the Elizabethan state's policies toward the Church of England, and that could continue to justify much more modest forms of establishment today.

II. *Objections to Religious Establishment*

Before delving into Hooker's exposition proper, let us first analyze more carefully one of the chief objections to religious establishment, an objection with which Hooker implicitly engages throughout this section. This is the charge that establishment leads inevitably to mere "civil religion," in which the mundane and often malign purposes of civil government are clothed in an aura of sanctity borrowed from the church, in which the church is instrumentalized for the promotion of mere political purposes.[4] Of course, such a civil religion need not require any formal establishment; indeed, it can flourish perhaps just as well in the absence of it, as the flag-waving of American Evangelicalism, the "Republican Party at prayer," readily demonstrates.[5] On the other hand, there seems to be no denying the reality of this danger, as the long history of the Church of England shows. James I famously pronounced, "No bishop, no king," and from the English Civil War to World War II, examples have not been lacking of leading churchmen lining up to baptize the sometimes sinister policies of their civil authorities or lending an aura of respectability to long-standing structural injustices.

To parry this objection, the defender of establishment might try to steer the conversation away from the idea of religion as a prop to support the polity and insist that the only purpose of establishment is to put the resources of the state to work in supporting the work of the church; establishment is thus an act of self-abnegation in which the kingdom of man becomes lesser

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[4] Such critiques of early modern Protestant establishments are commonplace, but see, for example, W. T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

[5] For a historical analysis, see D. G. Hart, *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). For a more recent (and more polemical) sociological analysis, see Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

that the kingdom of Christ shall become greater. And to some extent, any authentically Christian account of establishment must ultimately frame the relationship in this way: man's temporal ends must be subordinated to his eternal ends; the kingdoms of this earth must give way to the kingdom of Christ. However, it is striking that many Anglican defenders of establishment, Hooker among them, have not been afraid to grasp the nettle, openly affirming that during the time between Eden and the new Jerusalem, religion can and should be an instrument in service of the state's civil purposes.

After all, the charge of instrumentalization only hits home if an instrument is unsuited to the purpose for which it is being used, or if it can only be put to that purpose at the expense of some higher end. For instance, no one complains that a hammer is being "instrumentalized" to pound in a nail, but we would be horrified to see a precious heirloom employed for the purpose. In the social sphere, it would be no perversion of the good of friendship if I were to use the trust confided in me by two mutual friends to help mediate a quarrel between them. It would, however, be instrumentalizing the friendship if I sought to use my influence over one of them to get a coworker fired, clearing a path for my own promotion.

If we apply this analysis to religion and politics, it follows that the all-important questions are these: First, is a religion in fact well suited by its very nature to promote political order? Second, can it do so without at the same time detracting from its chief and highest purpose?

With respect to the first question, the dispute has raged throughout the two millennia of Christian political thought. Some, stressing passages such as Romans 13 and Christ's admonition to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Matt 22:21 ESV), have insisted that Christianity not only is compatible with political order but also provides one of its strongest supports, placing it on a firmer basis than any merely secular reasoning could. Others, from Anabaptists to papalists, have argued that Herod was right to quake in his boots at the news of a new king in Bethlehem, for the kingdom of Christ poses a constant and existential challenge to the kingdoms of men, subordinating all earthly allegiances to a higher loyalty.[6] Hooker, summing up in this respect the consensus of the magisterial Protestant Reformers, takes his stand with the first group, insisting that Christianity not only affirms the goodness of political order but also actively promotes that good through its own activities.

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[6] For a thorough and instructive anthology, see Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

Still, as the second question highlights, it remains possible that Christianity could genuinely promote the goods of political order, but only at the cost of distracting or detracting from its central purpose: fitting men for the kingdom of God. Indeed, some have argued that the church is liable to flourish best in conditions of political oppression or disorder, since men and women cheated of a chance at earthly happiness are more likely to take refuge within the church's doors. Even if we do not take such an extreme line, it might seem that since religion's civil value is largely separable from its particular doctrinal claims, any civil use of religion will naturally tend to weaken and relativize the church's distinctive witness, encouraging churchmen to downplay divisive doctrines for the sake of civil peace. This was in many ways the consistent Puritan critique of the Church of England; although the Puritans did not oppose establishment as such, they wanted an establishment that clearly subordinated civil ends to religious ends, since the Church of England's crucial role as political stabilizer in a divided society encouraged lukewarmness and doctrinal minimalism.[7]

In his argument for the goods of establishment in Book V, chapters 1–2, then, Hooker has to reckon with both of these concerns, demonstrating that the Christian religion promotes just political order and that it does so precisely *as the Christian religion*, not by diluting its particular truth claims. Indeed, he goes further, arguing that those who do seek to instrumentalize religion, deploying it for its civil benefits without regard to its specifically religious claims, will necessarily defeat their own purposes. The civil use of religion, in short, only works if religion is taken seriously on its own terms, just as a friendship can only serve as an instrument toward other ends so long as its integrity *as a friendship* is maintained and honored; as soon as my friend realizes he is valued only for his benefits, I will lose both those benefits and the friendship.

III. *Public Religion and Civic Virtue*

Perhaps Hooker's most memorable statement on the need for some kind of public establishment of religion comes toward the very end of his *magnum opus*, in Book VIII:

[7] See Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Theology of Law and Authority in the English Reformation*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 8; and W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Peril and Promise of Christian Liberty: Richard Hooker, the Puritans, and Protestant Political Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), ch. 3.

> A gross error it is to think that regal power ought to serve for the good of the body and not of the soul, for men's temporal peace and not their eternal safety; as if God had ordained kings for no other end and purpose but only to fat up men like hogs and to see that they have their mash? (VIII.3.5; *FLE* 3:352)[8]

It is the characteristic error of both Romanism and Puritanism, he believes, to formally separate the church and the commonwealth in a way that implicitly secularizes the latter, implying that civil magistrates can somehow confine themselves to bodily goods.[9] This reflects a deficient anthropology, one that fails to recognize the deep union of body and soul, and the inability of the former to flourish if the latter is not ordered to its true end.

The reasoning here is broadly Aristotelian, as becomes clear if we look to the work of one of Hooker's chief theological influences, the Florentine Reformer turned Oxford professor, Peter Martyr Vermigli. Attacking the Roman claims for papal supremacy, which gave to kings only care for the body, not the soul, Vermigli declares,

> So would they have princes to be only certain herd men to pamper the body. But the very philosophers do not so absurdly judge. For Aristotle in his *Politics* saith, that the office of a magistrate is, to provide that the people may live well and virtuously. And no greater virtue there is, than religion.[10]

Religion, Vermigli goes on to explain, is the architectonic virtue that orders and completes all others.[11] This certainly seems *prima facie* plausible, particularly from an Augustinian viewpoint in which all virtue depends on rightly ordered love, but Aristotle himself does not peg religion as the architectonic virtue, and so this claim is one that stands in need of some careful demonstration. It is this demonstration that Hooker seeks to provide in his discussion of public religion in Book V, chapters 1–2, which serves as a kind

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[8] W. Speed Hill and P. G. Stanwood, eds., *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 3: *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity; Books VI, VII, VIII* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

[9] For a fuller discussion, see Littlejohn, *Peril and Promise*, chs. 5–6; also W. J. Torrance Kirby, *Richard Hooker's Doctrine of the Royal Supremacy* (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

[10] Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Common Places of the Most Famous and Renowmed Diunine Doctor Peter Martyr*, trans. and ed. Anthonie Marten (London: Henry Denham & Henry Middleton, 1583), 4:246–47 (IV.14.2). Spelling modernized. For a fuller discussion, see W. Bradford Littlejohn, "More Than a Swineherd: Hooker, Vermigli, and the Aristotelian Defense of the Royal Supremacy," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 15.1 (2014): 78–93.

[11] "In all arts (as saith Aristotle) there is a certain respect unto the principal art. For example, the art of riding commandeth the saddler's craft. Also, the art of navigation is above that Art which maketh oars and sails, wherefore seeing the office of a magistrate is the chief and principal science, he ought to rule all the parts of a common weal." Vermigli, *Common Places*, 4:247 (IV.14.2).

of theoretical foundation for his later argument for royal supremacy in Book VIII.

As often, Hooker's chapter title offers a crisp thesis statement for the argument of V.1: "True religion is the root of all true virtues and the stay of all well ordered common-wealths." The metaphor here, it should be noted, is subtly different from that of Vermigli. Rather than framing religion as the *telos* toward which all other virtues aim, and thus the art of cultivating religion as an architectonic art that must govern the pursuit of all other virtues, Hooker here describes religion as the root or foundation of other virtues and thus the anchor or support for a functional polity. But in fact, the two metaphors are complementary within Hooker's Aristotelian framework, since according to Aristotle's theory of four causes, the final cause is also in some sense the first cause, the "cause of causes." As the highest end to which other ends aim, the highest art that governs other arts, religion is also what sets all other arts in motion, and so it can be described as both root and capstone of other virtues.

Indeed, Hooker makes this complex metaphor explicit a short way into the chapter:

> For if the course of politic affairs cannot in any good sort go forward without fit instruments, and that which fitteth them be their virtues, let polity acknowledge itself indebted to religion, godliness being the chiefest top and wellspring of all true virtues, even as God is of all good things. (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:17)[12]

This dual focus on religion as both beginning and end of a well-ordered commonwealth helps guard Hooker's defense of establishment from a crude instrumentalization, as it might be if religion merely served as a useful prop for fostering more important civic virtues. No, in Hooker's conception religion serves first to help engender and sustain civic virtues but then also transcends them, disclosing itself as their true end. That said, while Hooker sees "pure and unstained religion" as "the highest of all cares appertaining to public regiment" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:16), he nonetheless believes that *any* religion (implicitly defined as an awareness of transcendent divine being[s] and the reality of divine judgment) can still play a critical role in anchoring the practice of civic virtue.

He makes his argument through a survey of three of the four cardinal virtues, beginning with the highest, justice:

[12] W. Speed Hill, ed., *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 2: *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity; Book V* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).

> So natural is the union of religion with justice, that we may boldly deny there is either, where both are not. For how should they be unfeignedly just, whom religion doth not cause to be such …? If they, which employ their labor and travail, about the public administration of justice, follow it only as a trade, with unquenchable and unconscionable thirst for gain, being not in heart persuaded that justice is God's own work, and themselves agents in this business, the sentence of right God's own verdict, and themselves his priests to deliver it; formalities of justice do but serve to smother right, and that, which was necessarily ordained for the common good, is through shameful abuse made the cause of common misery. (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:17)

Justice, in other words, cannot be reduced to the mere maintenance of public order. To conceive of justice is to conceive of an objective order of right, an order ultimately dependent upon a divine lawgiver (as Hooker has argued at length in his discussion of the "law of reason" in Book I of the *Laws*). Divorced of its transcendent dimension, the pursuit and enforcement of justice becomes merely another trade, another way of making a living. And although the consciences of good magistrates may instill them with a sense of duty, this sense of duty cannot be sustained in the absence of any religious sense. What, then, will prevent the irreligious magistrate or policeman from resorting to bribery and corruption, especially if these seem best suited to grease the wheels of "justice," as they so often do?

Similarly, argues Hooker, religious devotion is the author of prudence, the virtue of practical reason that knows how to achieve the greatest good within the constraints of circumstances. For the pious man, "desirous to please and resemble God," will be filled with "zeal to do good (as far as their place will permit) unto all." Accordingly, he will search out which "actions [are] most beneficial to others," and in so doing, will "gather from thence great experience, and through experience the more wisdom, because conscience and the fear of swerving from that which is right maketh them diligent observers of circumstances, the loose regard thereof is the nurse of vulgar folly" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:17–18). Hooker thus turns on its head the common conception of the pious man as innocent, naïve, and thus inept in political affairs, easily deceived by those more worldly-wise. No, true piety should drive the righteous man on to an attentive study of the world and of human affairs so that godly kings will become the wisest of all rulers, like Solomon. Although he does not quote the verse, Hooker's reasoning here is well summed up in Proverbs 1:7: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

Fortitude, the third of the cardinal virtues, also rests on religion, according to Hooker. "Evils great and unexpected (the true touchstone of constant minds) do often cause oftentimes even them to think upon divine power with fearfullest suspicions, which have been otherwise the most secure despisers thereof" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:18). However much men may seek to silence

the voice of God and cheerily deny his existence, sudden calamity has a way of tearing open even the most hardened conscience. But the awareness of God that thus forces itself on the would-be atheist is no comfort, but an additional source of terror—the calamity cannot but be interpreted as an act of divine judgment. Hooker thus reasons that if the unbeliever is liable to be racked by terror in the face of misfortune, the believer will be most able to weather any sudden trial or suffering with courage and confidence: "How should we look for any constant resolution of mind in such cases saving only where unfeigned affection to Godward hath bred the most assured confidence to be assisted by his hand?" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:18). Hooker goes on to cite the extraordinary courage of the ancient Jews in the face of torment and adversity as proof of the connection between faith and fortitude.

Having surveyed the first three of the cardinal virtues, we might expect Hooker to end with a treatment of temperance, but he opts not to, perhaps deeming the argument in this case so obvious and familiar as not to need belaboring. Given the power of bodily appetites, and the weakness of the reason in restraining them (something that Hooker discusses at length in Book I, chapter 7), it seems clear that both the fear of divine judgment and the love of God that desires to please him would exert a powerful force in arming the will to resist and govern the disorderly passions. In any case, in place of explicitly addressing the relationship between religion and temperance, Hooker closes this section by gently rebuking utopian ideas of a golden age of social harmony based on merely natural virtue:

> They which commend so much the felicity of that innocent world, wherein it is said, that men of their own accord did embrace fidelity and honesty, not for fear of the magistrate … but that which held the people in awe was the shame of ill doing, the love of equity and right itself a bar against all oppressions which greatness of power causeth, they which describe unto us any such estate of happiness amongst men, though they speak not of religion, do notwithstanding declare that, which is in truth her only working. (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:19)

Hooker does not claim that there could be *no* motivation to right action without religion, without the love of God and the fear of his judgment. Clearly, mere fear of men, good habits, and an instinctive sense of right and wrong can go a long way in enforcing the virtues—but these motives will also fall well short without piety. Even if "all other ornaments of mind might be had in their full perfection, nevertheless the mind that should possess them divorced from piety" would be like "that body is, which, adorned with sundry other admirable beauties, wanteth eye sight, the chiefest grace that nature hath in that kind to bestow" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:18–19).

Indeed, religion is not merely a necessary cause of perfect virtue, but a sufficient cause: "For if religion did possess sincerely and sufficiently the hearts of all men, there would need no other restraint from evil" (V.1.2; *FLE* 2:19).

This last observation, however, pushes back to the forefront the question that Hooker has temporarily sidelined: Will any old religion do? Is mere sincerity enough? From the account he has given so far, it might look like it. As long as you sincerely believe that there is some kind of divinity, love its goodness, and fear its judgment, you will be motivated to seek authentic justice, spurred on to gain wisdom and prudence, and fortified against fear and uncertainty. Can we thus rest content with a mere least-common-denominator civil religion, or else, like the ancient Romans, promote each traditional cult, whatever it is, for the sake of public order?

IV. *Against Machiavellian Civil Religion*

After arguing that one of the natural effects of religion is to promote civic virtue, then, Hooker turns to address the objection that "it greatly skilleth [matters] not of what sort our religion be, in as much as heathens, Turks, infidels impute to religion a great part of the same effects which our selves ascribe thereunto" (V.1.3; *FLE* 2:19). From a Machiavellian standpoint, it might seem obvious that if religious piety in general helps produce the social and civic virtues that Hooker has surveyed, any religion capable of swaying the masses ought to do the trick. The wise ruler then could choose to promote whatever religion happened to be in the majority, trusting that not only would it fortify social cohesion, but it would also nourish a people committed to justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude. Indeed, some contemporary attempts to revive the argument for the importance of public religion, such as that of Israeli American political philosopher Yoram Hazony, seem to fall into this mode of argument. Although himself a devout Jew, Hazony somewhat startlingly closes his new book, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery*, by expressing his hope that American Christians will reinstate Protestant Christianity as the public religion of their own society.[13]

Hooker, while appreciating the plausibility of this reasoning, sets his face firmly against such relativism. The main reason why it fails, he argues, is that religion is not simply like other sources of social cohesion and virtue. Churches, like bowling leagues and bridge clubs, can help nourish a virtuous

[13] Yoram Hazony, *Conservatism: A Rediscovery* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 2022), 221.

and interdependent citizenry, as sociologist Robert Putnam has famously noted in *Bowling Alone*.[14] However, the specific benefits of religion are dependent on *truth claims*. A dedicated bowler or bridge player may prefer their game to others, but they are unlikely to make binding universal truth claims about its superiority. Religions, however, are notoriously prone to conflict and controversy—not because religious people are singularly fractious, but because the stakes of their disagreements are so high. Hooker observes,

> By the bitter strife, which riseth oftentimes from small differences in this behalf, and is by so much always greater, as the matter is of more importance, we see a general agreement in the secret opinion of men, that every man ought to embrace the religion which is true, and to shun, as hurtful, whatsoever dissenteth from it, but that most, which doth farthest dissent. (V.1.3; *FLE* 2:19–20)

While many Enlightenment philosophers and modern liberal theorists have hoped that they could harness all the civic benefits of religion while stripping religion of its predilection for sectarian conflict, thus making possible a peaceable pluralism, Hooker argues that this is a fool's errand. It is in the nature of religions *qua* religions to make exclusive claims, and if their adherents actually believe that their own claims about the deity and the duties he demands are true, they will necessarily believe that others are false.

At the very least, then, a wise ruler hoping to establish a virtue-forming public religion will have to make a choice, privileging and promoting one religion rather than another. To be sure, many modern nations have hoped that a mere general religiosity would do the trick, but they have tended to find that, as they have tried to downplay the differences between religions, authentic religious conviction and practice have diminished in proportion, just as Hooker would have predicted. Indeed, given his commitment to a Thomistic method, which discerns the divine hand in observable inclinations of human nature, Hooker concludes that our native tendency to dispute about religious doctrines is itself proof that God *wants* us to take doctrinal differences seriously: "… the generality of which persuasion argueth, that God hath imprinted it by nature, to the end it might be a spur to our industry, in searching and maintaining that [true] religion" (V.1.3; *FLE* 2:20). Thus Hooker insists not only that the statesman must reckon seriously with the fact that people *believe* religious claims to be mutually exclusive, but he must recognize that *they are in fact so*.

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[14] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

It remains, then, simply to argue that, if public religion matters, and if there is in fact one true religion, that our public religion should in fact be that one true religion. This might indeed seem almost self-evident, but one could imagine a counterargument. It might be, for instance, that the civil and temporal benefits of religion are generic, just as liable to flow from Islam or Zoroastrianism as from Christianity, and that only when it comes to eternal consequences does one's religion make any difference. Hooker has little time for such a bifurcation of temporal and eternal, however. Given his underlying conviction that grace perfects nature and restores fallen nature to its proper functioning, it is almost axiomatic for him that the true worship of God will carry palpable this-worldly benefits. "Without all controversy," he asserts, "the purer and perfecter our religion is, the worthier effects it hath in them who steadfastly and sincerely embrace it" (V.1.4; *FLE* 2:21).

However, when it comes to temporal matters at least, this difference is not black and white, but manifests itself along a spectrum. A false religion may be of no value whatsoever in the life to come, but in this life, Hooker believes that it can and will still produce some of the benefits he has outlined above in his catalog of virtues. Hooker considers, for instance, the ancient Romans' superstitious practice of augury: although they may have been laughably wrong to think that the flight patterns of birds or the entrails of animals disclosed the divine purpose to them, they were still right to believe that there *was* a divine purpose, and to the extent that this gave them great courage and confidence in facing their foes, convinced that the signs were in their favor, it often helped them win victories. Indeed, Hooker's observation here served as the premise for a somewhat ridiculous, if endearing, modern film, *Angels in the Outfield* (1994), in which an abysmal baseball team turns their season around with the aid of blatant divine intervention. At the climax of the film, the angels report that they are not allowed to interfere in championship games, but the coach keeps this from the players, who, confidently believing they have the angels on their side, muster the grit to triumph. On a bit more serious note, Hooker notes that the almost universal practice of oath taking is another example of the generic benefits of religion. The pagans who took such oaths were wrong in believing that their false gods would take vengeance upon them for perjury, but right to believe that perjury would invite divine vengeance—albeit from the true God, whom they did not know. "The right conceit which they had, that to perjury vengeance is due, was not without good effect as touching the course of their lives" (V.1.3; *FLE* 2:21).

In view of this, Hooker has nothing but contempt for Machiavellians who, seeing that there is "a politic use of religion," imagine "that religion itself is a mere politic device, forged purposely to serve for that use" (V.2.2; *FLE* 2:25).[15] This conviction, he says, leads them into absurdity since they try to "take all occasion of rare events, and from what cause soever the same do proceed, yet wrest them to the strengthening of their religion, and not make it nice for so good a purpose to use, if need be, plain forgeries" (V.2.3; *FLE* 2:26). Given that the atheism from which this approach stems is the "most extreme opposite unto true religion" (V.2; *FLE* 2:22), it stands to reason that it will fail utterly to produce those civil benefits that appear, in their fullest form, in the wake of Christianity. It is not hard to see, says Hooker, why it will fail, for "treachery, guile, and deceit are things which may for awhile, but do not use long to go unespied" (V.2.4; *FLE* 2:26); therefore, the statesman who resorts to them as a temporary expedient to prop up his false civil religion will soon find that his forgeries are uncovered, his religion exposed as a fraud, and his state accordingly deprived of all credibility.

Putting all this together, Hooker seeks to offer a balanced perspective that recognizes the universal social and civil benefits of public religion while still stressing that all religions are not created equal and that the truer our religion is and the more sincerely we hold it, the greater its blessings to the commonwealth:

> Seeing therefore it doth thus appear that the safety of all estates dependeth upon religion; that religion unfeignedly loved perfecteth men's abilities unto all kinds of virtuous services in the commonwealth; that men's desire is in general to hold no religion but the true; and that whatsoever good effects do grow out of their religion who embrace instead of the true a false, the root thereof are certain sparks of the light of truth intermingled with the darkness of error … we have reason to think that all true virtues are to honor true religion as their parent, and all well-ordered common-weals to love her as their chiefest stay. (V.1.5; *FLE* 2:22)

Conclusion

Even if the modern reader grants the force of Hooker's arguments in favor of a public establishment of Christianity, many questions will remain unanswered. It may be true in principle that the sincerest pursuit of the truest form of Christianity will in the end redound most fully to a society's temporal flourishing, but in practice, the two will often seem to be in conflict. Indeed, the reign of Elizabeth I, whom Hooker extolled in his dedication to

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[15] Hooker clearly has Machiavelli himself in his sights here, since he acknowledges him explicitly in a rare marginal note, referencing the *Discourses on Livy*, Book I, chapters 11–14.

Book V, was a case study of such a conflict. Throughout her reign, the apparently clear political necessity of minimizing conflict with Roman Catholics at home and abroad led Elizabeth to take a cautious approach to the cause of the Reformation. By tolerating and indeed mandating what seemed to many quasi-popish ceremonies within the Church of England, and by refusing to actively intervene on behalf of persecuted Protestants abroad, Elizabeth's policy tacitly signaled that not true piety, but lukewarm religion, was "the chiefest stay" of a "well-ordered commonweal."[16]

More seriously, modern defenders of religious liberty may hone in on Hooker's emphasis on the importance of *sincerity* to argue against the wisdom of religious establishment. Hooker indeed acknowledges that sincerity matters even more than truth when it comes to religion's temporal benefits: "They that love the religion which they profess may have failed in choice, but yet they are sure to reap what benefit the same is able to afford, whereas the best and soundest professed by them that bear it not the like affection, yieldeth them … no benefit" (V.1.4; *FLE* 2:21). In other words, those who make a merely formal profession of Christianity are no better off eternally, and are worse off temporally, than those who worship Allah in full sincerity. This striking admission would seem to lend credence to arguments, such as those of Andrew Walker in *Liberty for All*, that Christians should promote full religious liberty so that individuals will embrace Christianity or any other religion out of sincere conviction and choice rather than fear of coercion.[17]

Of course, Hooker's vision of establishment seems to focus more on the magistrate's role in positively promoting right religion rather than actively persecuting false religion. Indeed, it was an axiom—albeit a slippery one—of Elizabethan policy that no Catholics or dissenters were punished for their religious errors as such, but only for the threat they posed to civil order. Still, even if we set aside any form of religious coercion and envision a much more moderate and gentler religious establishment, such as that of the Church of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concern about sincerity is still well-placed. Does not the state's recognition of and promotion of a particular church encourage people to attach themselves to that church merely for the social benefits and political opportunities afforded thereby rather than out of any genuine religious conviction? The pages

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[16] For a survey of Elizabeth's cautious religious policy, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547–1603* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001); for Elizabeth's cautious foreign policy in the midst of pressures to intervene on behalf of beleaguered continental Protestants, see R. B. Wernham, *The Making of Elizabethan Foreign Policy, 1558–1603* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).

[17] Andrew T. Walker, *Liberty for All: Defending Everyone's Religious Freedom in a Pluralistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2021).

of early English novels are filled with characters for whom the church seems to have little function beyond that of social advancement.

Even assuming such objections were persuasively answered, unanswerable questions remain about how, if at all, Western societies might be brought to return to the kind of publicly established Christianity that Hooker champions. Some readers, accordingly, might wonder how there is any value in learning from a text so seemingly obsolete as Hooker's *Laws*. That, however, would be shortsighted. Regardless of the prudential objections and practical obstacles to church establishment today, Hooker's insights into the link between religion and virtue, piety and justice, remain as true now as they ever were. If Hooker is right that every religion instills its sincere practitioners with a heightened conscientiousness in the pursuit of justice, a more earnest search for wisdom about the common good, and a calm confidence in the face of danger, then it follows at the very least that dogmatic secularism is a bankrupt political philosophy, running on borrowed capital. If, moreover, Hooker is right that it is in the very nature of religion to make exclusive truth claims, and the truest religion will produce very different this-worldly effects than corrupt religions will, then it follows that Rawlsian liberalism will not do: tolerance of religious difference is not a natural virtue, and a pluralistic society should expect to witness intense moral and religious conflict, as indeed we are seeing in Western liberal democracies today.[18]

How should a Christian statesman today respond in light of these truths? For this, there are no easy answers, and the judicious Hooker, ever conscious of the mutability and complexity of human affairs, would be the first to say so. But wisdom for the present must begin, at least, in a respectful appropriation of the past. Too often Christians today have dismissed the very idea of religious establishment as an embarrassing relic, a testament to a time in which church leaders doubted the power of the gospel to sustain itself without the aid of princes, and in which cynical princes were only too happy to co-opt the church to their political interests. Writers like Hooker can at least remind us that there was, *and is*, a compelling and consistent logic to the ideal of religious establishment, built on the conviction that "that nature hath need of grace, whereunto I hope we are not opposite, by holding that grace hath use of nature" (III.8.6; *FLE* 1:223).[19]

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[18] For a compelling argument on the contradictions bedeviling the Rawlsian vision of religious pluralism and the inescapability of confessional conflict, see John Perry, *The Pretenses of Loyalty: Locke, Liberal Theory, and American Political Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[19] W. Speed Hill and Georges Edelen, eds., *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker*, vol. 1: *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*; *Pref., Books I to IV* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977).