

Ussher and Early Modern Anglicanism in Ireland

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Abstract

This essay argues that the Church of Ireland in the early modern period was a Reformed expression of Anglicanism by investigating a few events in the life and ministry of James Ussher, the Archbishop of Armagh. First, it looks at Ussher's contributions to the Church of Ireland's burgeoning Reformed identity by recounting his debate with a well-known Jesuit theologian, which substantiated his vigorously Protestant outlook, and his involvement in composing the Irish Articles of 1615. Second, it looks at how he later attempted to defend Reformed theology in the Church of Ireland from Arminianizing impositions from the Church of England. Finally, it presents an upcoming release of Ussher's never-before-published lectures in theology, which provide a fresh perspective on his Reformed identity.

Keywords

James Ussher, Reformed Conformity, Irish Articles, Church of Ireland, Irish Protestantism

Introduction

Ireland does not typically leap to mind as the first country connected to Anglicanism, even in reference to the modern global Anglican movement. Its history is far more often linked to Roman Catholicism, if not outright mysticism, than any form of Protestantism. That perception, however, did not arise because of an entirely static religious history since the Church of Ireland has at times had not only a truly Protestant ethos but even a rigorously confessional Reformed theology. In the early modern period, the Reformation made its way to varying degrees into countries across Europe, even beginning to reach into Ireland. The Irish Reformation, in the ways explored below, was nonetheless unique not only in its process but in some ways also in its results. This essay provides a snapshot into Irish Anglicanism, namely the religion of the Church of Ireland, primarily in the seventeenth century, by looking at the life and work of one of its most enduring figures, arguing that this expression of Anglicanism was one of its most pointedly Reformed instantiations.

James Ussher (1581–1656), Archbishop of Armagh in the early seventeenth century, arguably remains the foremost advocate of Reformed theology in Ireland’s history, particularly within the Church of Ireland. Ussher is usually associated today with his work on dating creation, being linked frequently to causes in young-earth creationism. His reputation in his own time, however, spanned numerous disciplines and earned him renown as a theologian, preacher, historian, and antiquarian. Even if he may have had peers, the claim that there was no *bigger* name than Ussher’s in the seventeenth century nowhere near approaches an overstatement. An introduction to early modern Anglicanism in Ireland, therefore, rightly grapples primarily with Ussher’s contributions.

This essay then explores a few examples of Ussher’s work for the sake of Reformed theology in Ireland. Especially for his time, Ussher lived a long life, entailing a lengthy career. His ministry can be divided between an early phase in Ireland, taking place circa 1600–1640, and then a later phase in England, 1640–1656. To maintain focus on a global Anglican theme and so not emphasize Ussher at the expense of what he helps us understand concerning Anglicanism *in Ireland*, our attention concentrates on that earlier phase, when Ussher conducted his ministry not only for the Church of Ireland but also geographically within Ireland.¹

¹ For a concise overview of the English phase of Ussher’s ministry, see Harrison Perkins, “Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656): His Life and Work, the Scholarship about Him, and His Significance for Confessional Presbyterians,” *Confessional Presbyterian* 16 (2020): 7–10.



JAMES USSHER

1581-1656

Before investigating those examples, a short introduction to Ussher's life will help contextualize the rest of our considerations about his work.² He was born in Dublin on January 4, 1581, joining a prominent family that had long served the English government in Ireland. His early schooling included instruction from James Fuller and James Hamilton, Scottish Presbyterians ministering in Ireland. In 1594, he enrolled at Trinity College Dublin, the newly founded university that also featured Fuller and Hamilton as fellows. At Trinity College, he became a fellow in 1598, received a BA in 1599, an MA in 1600, a BD in 1607, and his DD in 1612. During this period, he also served as catechist for the university, preacher at Saint Katherine's in Dublin, chancellor of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and afternoon lecturer at Christ's Church, Dublin.³ In 1621, Ussher transitioned from more academic emphases into full ecclesiastical service, being appointed Bishop of Meath.⁴ As one of his final acts before he died in 1625, James VI and I of Scotland and England (1566–1625), promoted Ussher to Archbishop of Armagh, the highest see in the Church of Ireland. Although Ussher certainly engaged in other notable work in the years following 1625, this brief sketch of his life and achievements provides an adequate framework for understanding the biographical context in which he worked during the phase of his ministry that took place in Ireland until 1640. Clearly, Ussher was poised as an accomplished academic and churchman, being well positioned to make important contributions to the development of the Church of Ireland's identity specifically as a Reformed communion.

The final introductory matter is simply to note that "Anglicanism" is an anachronistic term when applied to the early modern period, especially to the Church of Ireland. Historians are much fonder of referring to "the established churches of England and Ireland" because that designation does justice to the nature of their still solidifying identities, which were not yet cemented as such in their dependent relationship.⁵ This point's relevance manifests most strikingly in the abiding claim that Anglicanism is a distinct form of religion "characterized as a distinctive path between Roman

² The three most useful biographical studies about Ussher are Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland and England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); R. Buick Knox, *James Ussher: Archbishop of Armagh* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1967), 7–79; Crawford Gribben, *The Irish Puritans: James Ussher and the Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003).

³ Ford, *James Ussher*, 32–56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 42–43.

⁵ Anthony Milton, "Reformation, Identity, and 'Anglicanism,' c. 1520–1662," in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism*, vol. 1: *Reformation and Identity, c. 1520–1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–27.

Catholicism and Protestantism, avoiding the excesses of both.”⁶ Apart from how that assessment may hold up from the perspective of our contemporary long look back at the Church of England’s history, a more narrow historical focus on the established church in Ireland during the seventeenth century shows how that claim certainly does not resonate with early modern Anglicanism in Ireland, which was avidly Protestant, with strong Reformed commitments, and at times vigorously anti-Catholic. In this respect, the study of Anglicanism is often very Anglocentric in the technical sense of measuring all factors by their relation to England. If Anglicanism is to be considered a properly global movement, however, due credit must be given to how not all its expressions fit the moderate mold of the middle way. The application of Anglicanism to the Church of Ireland in the seventeenth century is thus used here in the qualified but colloquial sense of referring to the established church which *has at some time* had direct and solidified communal and ecclesial-political ties to the Church of England, so following its governance.⁷

I. Reformed Efforts in the Church of Ireland

Ireland’s religious history has always been and remains tumultuous.⁸ This discord perhaps especially applies to Protestantism’s role in the country culturally and politically probably more so even than theologically, properly speaking. Those problems were fully active during the seventeenth century when Ussher labored to make his theological contributions to the Church of Ireland. Nonetheless, Ussher made several contributions early in his career that highlight his efforts to establish a fully Protestant and Reformed communion.

The backdrop to Ussher’s work is the wider context of the Irish Reformation, studies on which have essentially agreed that it failed. Although scholars debate about *when* it failed, specifically when its failure became inevitable, failure is nonetheless an agreed assessment.⁹ Ian Hazlett

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷ The Church of Ireland no longer has those ties since the Irish Church Act of 1869 disestablished her.

⁸ Crawford Gribben, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁹ Concerning these debates about the Irish Reformation, see Brendan Bradshaw, *The Dissolution of the Religious Orders in Ireland Under Henry VIII* (1974; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Nicholas Canny, “Why the Reformation Failed in Ireland: Une question mal posée,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 30.4 (October 1979): 423–50; Karl S. Bottigheimer, “The Failure of the Reformation in Ireland: Une question bien posée,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36.2 (April 1985): 196–207; Nicholas Canny, “Protestants, Planters and

masterfully captured the Irish Reformation's failure alongside its long-standing implications for the country's internal relations between Protestant and Roman Catholic communities:

The incongruity of the Irish situation was that although the Reformation is conventionally perceived in terms of failure, an aborted event or a non-event, or a surviving runt kept alive by a life-support machine sponsored by the British "state," it has nonetheless made a practically irreversible, if debatable, impact on the country.¹⁰

The incongruity was of course that, whereas the Reformation in most European countries grew from the ground up with the Protestant populace appealing to the magistrate, the Irish Reformation hovered as a movement of the established church, with the establishment attempting to use official means to inculcate its doctrine among a majority Roman Catholic population who consistently associated Reformation teaching with the imposition of English rule.¹¹ Ussher found himself as one of the chief players on the Protestant side of this cultural and religious contest.

A key event in Ussher's life that set him on his trajectory toward that role was his debate in 1600 with Henry Fitzsimon (1566–1643). Fitzsimon was a Jesuit missionary—actually Ussher's cousin—who had taught philosophy at the Jesuit college in Douai but had returned to his native Ireland to further the Counter-Reformation cause there. He was well-known and highly respected as an apologist for Roman Catholicism and, during his time back in Ireland, sought opportunities to debate Protestants, though going some time with no takers.¹² When Fitzsimon found himself imprisoned in Dublin Castle, Ussher, although only nineteen years old, unordained, and still a student not yet with even an MA, took up the challenge to debate him, agreeing to a series of topics from the primary work in Jesuit apologetics by

Apartheid in Early Modern Ireland," *Irish Historical Studies* 25.98 (1986): 105–15; Samantha A. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism, 1400–1690* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Brendan Bradshaw, "The English Reformation and Identity Formation in Wales and Ireland," in *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533–1707*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 43–111; Nicholas Canny, Karl S. Bottigheimer, and Steven G. Ellis, "The Debate about the Irish Reformation: Some Reflections on Twentieth-Century Historiography," in *The Church of Ireland and Its Past: History, Interpretation and Identity*, ed. Mark Empey, Alan Ford, and Miriam Moffitt (Dublin: Four Courts, 2017), 237–65.

¹⁰ W. Ian P. Hazlett, *The Reformation in Britain and Ireland: An Introduction* (Trowbridge, UK: T&T Clark International, 2003), 85.

¹¹ Ford, *James Ussher*, 22–30.

¹² Oliver P. Rafferty, "Henry Fitzsimon, the Irish Jesuits and Catholic Identity in the Early Modern Period," in *Irish Catholic Identities*, ed. Oliver P. Rafferty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 110–21.

Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621).¹³ Their first debate dealt with the topic of whether the pope is the antichrist.¹⁴ Although Fitzsimon soon withdrew from the debates, thinking himself above being set against such a young adversary, the event reveals Ussher as a burgeoning theologian who was avidly Protestant and even anti-Romanist within the Church of Ireland.¹⁵

The debate with Fitzsimon likely set Ussher on the trajectory, at least intellectually speaking, for his eventual role as the Professor of Theological Controversies at Trinity College. Today, this role would be akin to teaching systematic theology, but in seventeenth-century Ireland, it meant focusing on one particular task: refuting Robert Bellarmine, the Jesuit theologian who was Rome's foremost apologist against Protestantism. Arguably, Ussher's debates with Fitzsimon truly culminated in 1624 when he published his *Answer... to a Jesuit in Ireland*, a pointedly theological work aimed at refuting Roman Catholic positions on eleven topics where Protestants disputed them, which Ussher argued from biblical, theological, and historical grounds.¹⁶ Even later in life, Ussher was still devoted to dismantling the specifically Jesuit version of Roman doctrine, lecturing in Oxford in 1643–44: "Reade no Jesuites at all, for they are nothing but ostentacion and never understood the Scriptures."¹⁷ Ussher's encounter with Fitzsimon was then formative in establishing his lifelong concern to polemicize against Rome to further the Protestant cause.

Another event that shows how the Church of Ireland in the seventeenth century was avowedly Reformed, Ussher again playing a central role, is the production of the Irish Articles of 1615. The early modern period, at least into the eighteenth century, was the era of confessionalization.¹⁸ The Church of England ratified its Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563, but the Church of Ireland lacked a confessional statement. Despite the link between the two established churches, rather than adopting England's confession as its own, the Church of Ireland resolved to compose its own, which would be a more resolutely and thoroughly Reformed statement of faith.

Without suggesting that the Thirty-Nine Articles were not Reformed, or even imprecisely so, the Irish Articles were formulated to exclude ambiguity

¹³ Robert Bellarmine, *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei*, 3 vols. (Ingolstadt, 1586–90).

¹⁴ Oxford Bodleian Library MS Barlow 13, fol. 80r–83r.

¹⁵ Ford, *James Ussher*, 11–14.

¹⁶ James Ussher, *An Answer to a Challenge Made by a Jesuite in Ireland* (Dublin, 1624).

¹⁷ Queens College, Oxford MS 217, fol. 42v; these lectures are introduced and transcribed in full in Harrison Perkins, "Archbishop Ussher's Reading List," *Confessional Presbyterian 16* (2020): 21–32, quote on 32.

¹⁸ Concerning that decline of confessionalism, see J. V. Fesko, *The Need for Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 43–75.

that had allowed less-than-Reformed theologians in the Church of England still to find themselves within the English confession. Several theological controversies occurred in England surrounding the doctrine of predestination, with some English theologians taking views that did not cohere with the wider Reformed consensus about God's sovereignty in salvation.¹⁹ Challenges to predestinarianism eventually resulted in the Lambeth Articles of 1595, which uncompromisingly stated God's election and reprobation.²⁰ Although the Lambeth Articles never received confessionally recognized status in England, the Irish Articles furthered their "Calvinist consensus" by including statements from the Thirty-Nine Articles with each of the Lambeth Articles as well as affirmations of other Reformed doctrines that had developed since those previous documents were composed.²¹ The Irish Articles then furthered a specifically Reformed trajectory within the established church in Ireland.

The Church of Ireland did formally produce the Irish Articles. The Irish convocation comprised two houses, one for bishops and one for lower clergy, which met 1613–15 to mirror Parliament, deciding to produce their own statement of faith.²² Whatever role Ussher played in composing the Irish Articles, a topic addressed in this essay's final subsection, the Church of Ireland adopted them as its confession ratified by the whole convocation.²³ The accepted confession was published in 1615.²⁴

The Irish Articles' contribution as a specifically Reformed confession shows itself in several of its distinct contributions to the confessional tradition. Although all its articles on God's decree are predestinarian, two stand out as staunchly double predestinarian, taking a stand that excluded the views that had caused controversy in England by dissenting from the Reformed consensus and that in some ways preempted the Remonstrant

¹⁹ Jay T. Collier, *Debating Perseverance: The Augustinian Heritage in Post-Reformation England*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 20–58. These issues continued in the Church of England after 1615 as well; Stephen Hampton, *Grace and Conformity: The Reformed Conformist Tradition and the Early Stuart Church of England*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 28–67.

²⁰ Peter Marshall, "Settlement Patterns: The Church of England, 1553–1603," in *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, ed. Milton, 1:56–61.

²¹ Anthony Milton, "Unsettled Reformations, 1603–1662," in *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, ed. Milton, 1:65–68.

²² Ford, *James Ussher*, 86.

²³ William Prynne, *The Church of England's Old Antithesis to New Arminianism* (London, 1629), 13, 119.

²⁴ *Articles of Religion Agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops, and the rest of the Cleargie of Ireland, in the Convocation Holden at Dublin in the yeare of our Lord God 1615* (Dublin: John Franckton, 1615).

positions addressed at the Synod of Dort. The Church of Ireland plainly confessed double predestinarianism in article 12: “By the same eternall counsell God hath predestinated some vnto life, and reprobated some vnto death of both which there is a certaine number, knowen only to God, which can neither be increased nor diminished.”²⁵ Further, in article 14, they affirmed God’s full freedom and sovereignty in this predestining work, excluding any human cause from it:

The cause mouing God to predestinate vnto life, is not the foreseeing of faith, or perseverance, or good workes, or of anything which is in the person predestinated, but only the good pleasure of God himself. For all things being ordained for the manifestation of his glory, and his glory being to appeare both in the workes of his Mercy and of his Iustice it seemed good to his heauenly wisdom to choose out a certaine number towards whome he would extend his vnderued mercy, leauing the rest to be spectacles of his iustice.²⁶

This statement seems proleptic of the Canons of Dort 1.7, which also ascribes election to God’s good pleasure, excluding foreseen faith and attributes perseverance to God’s work rather than as a cause of election.²⁷

The Irish Articles’ Reformed pedigree does not end with its predestinarianism but extends to its furthering of developing Reformed doctrines. For example, Reformed theologians had been increasingly incorporating the doctrine of God’s covenant with Adam, which was based on the law as the condition for inheriting everlasting life, into their theological systems but had not yet incorporated it formally into any Protestant confession.²⁸ Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583) demonstrates this point, although the Heidelberg Catechism did not *explicitly* contain this doctrine that would eventually be most commonly known as the covenant of works, by decisively linking the law at creation to a covenant based upon it:

The law contains the natural covenant, which God began with men in creation, that is, it is known by men by nature and requires from us perfect obedience toward God, and promises everlasting life to those who keep it but threatens everlasting death to those who do not keep it.²⁹

²⁵ *Articles*, sig. B1v.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 3:562.

²⁸ J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Works: The Origins, Development, and Reception of the Doctrine*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11–72; Harrison Perkins, “Reconsidering the Development of the Covenant of Works: A Study in Doctrinal Trajectory,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 53.2 (2018): 289–317.

²⁹ Zacharius Ursinus, *Catechesis, Summa Theologiae*, in *Opera Theologica* (Heidelberg, 1612), 1:14 (*Lex continet foedus naturale, in creatione a Deo cum hominibus initum, hoc est, natura hominibus*

In this respect, Irish Article 21 first brought this doctrine of God’s covenant with Adam into the confessional tradition:

Man being at the beginning created according to the image of God (which consisted especially in the Wisdom of his minde, & the true Holynesse of his free will) had the covenant of lawe ingrained in his heart: whereby God did promise vnto him euerlasting life, vpon condition that he performed entire and perfect obedience vnto his Commaundement, according to that measure of strength wherewith hee was endued in his creation, and threatened death vnto him if he did not performe the same.³⁰

The Irish Articles were then firmly embedded in the developing tradition of specifically Reformed theology.

The Irish Articles also contain several points of specifically Reformed piety, which was not even overtly and universally shared in the Church of England. Article 53 affirms that the second commandment forbids any making of images of the Godhead: “All manner of expressing God the Father, the Sonne, and the Holy Ghost, in an outward forme, is vtterly vnlawfull. As also all other images deuised or made by man to the vse of Religion.”³¹ Article 56 is overtly Sabbatarian:

The first day of the weeke, which is the *Lords day*, is wholly to be dedicated unto seruice of God: and therefore we are bound therein to rest from our common and dayly buysinesse; and to bestowe that leasure upon holy exercises, both publike and priuate.³²

Article 80, following Ussher’s earlier debate with Fitzsimon, affirmed that the pope is the antichrist:

The Bishop of Rome is so farre from being the Supream head of the universall Church of Christ, that his workes and doctrine doe plainly discover him to be *that man of sinne*, foretold in the holy Scriptures, *whom the Lord shall consume with the Spirit of his mouth, and abolish with the brightnesse of his coming*.³³

In traditional, developing, and ethical ways, the Irish Articles was then a statedly Reformed confession.

nota est, & requirit a nobis perfectam obedientiam erga Deum, & praestantibus eam, promittit vitam aeternam, non praestantibus minatur aeternas poenas).

³⁰ *Articles*, sig. B2v.

³¹ *Articles*, sig. C4r.

³² *Articles*, sig. C4v.

³³ *Articles*, sig. D4r (italics original).

The Irish Articles' significance for understanding Anglican identity deserves emphasis. This confession, far from being a highly parochial document for an Irish context, was well respected and nearly obtained confessional status in the Church of England in 1629, when Charles I closed Parliament before it could ratify the Articles.³⁴ Scholars have long documented the Westminster Assembly's use of the Irish Articles in shaping their confession of faith.³⁵ At least in the seventeenth century then, *Irish* "Anglicanism" leaned heavily Reformed, earning appreciation from many of their English counterparts as well. That reputation suggests that the *via media* view of Anglicanism has not accounted for the staunchly Reformed and anti-Catholic tone of the established church in Ireland during Ussher's tenure.

Ussher's role in composing the Irish Articles has not been much debated historically, although Alan Ford has sought to challenge to some degree his role in this regard. In earlier work, Ford stridently dismissed Ussher as the Articles' author, but recently, he has presented him as a major but not exclusive contributor.³⁶ Ford's downplaying of Ussher's role in the Articles, however, likely relates to an effort to minimize Ussher's specifically Reformed identity, since Ford seems to assume that Anglicanism cannot truly include thoroughly Reformed doctrine. Criticizing my work on Ussher's covenant theology, Ford wrote, "Perkins has a tendency, first, to claim too much originality for Ussher's views, and, second, to seek to recruit him as a fully paid-up member of the Presbyterian church."³⁷ The critique is odd on the first point since I argued that Ussher's was not original but ecumenical—hence "catholicity" in my book's title—writing, "There was, therefore, at least in the roots of the idea, an underlying catholicity to Ussher's construction of

³⁴ John McCafferty, "Ireland and Scotland, 1534–1663," in *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, ed. Milton, 1:251; Ford, *James Ussher*, 140.

³⁵ Richard A. Muller, "'Inspired by God—Pure in All Ages': The Doctrine of Scripture in the Westminster Confession," in Richard A. Muller and Roland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 40–42; J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insight* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 60; Alexander F. Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884), 372–85; Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 62–83; Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959; repr., Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 59; Harrison Perkins, "The Westminster Assembly's Probable Appropriation of James Ussher," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 37.1 (Spring 2019): 51–57.

³⁶ Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590–1641* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996), 156–78; Ford, *James Ussher*, 85–103.

³⁷ Alan Ford, review of *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works: James Ussher and the Reformed Tradition*, by Harrison Perkins, *Irish Historical Studies* 45.167 (May 2021): 132.

the covenant of works, which is a major point that is highlighted throughout this study and is one of its fundamental claims.”³⁸ Ford’s critique’s second aspect is also odd, since I spent a great deal of time, following Stephen Hampton’s scholarship, arguing that Ussher demonstrates the need for an expanded use of the Reformed Conformist category within research into the Anglican tradition, highlighting Ussher’s commitment to the established church’s practices to which Presbyterians strongly objected.³⁹ Ford’s critique then seems to rest not so much on observations that I too closely linked Ussher with Presbyterianism as on an assumption that major theologians in the established church tradition could not be as stridently Reformed as the evidence shows Ussher was.⁴⁰ Ussher’s role in composing the Irish Articles underscores not only his own Reformed commitments but the Reformed credentials of one part of the Anglican communion in the early modern period.

II. *Controversial Laudianism and Canon Law*

Whereas early in the seventeenth century, the Church of Ireland faced obstacles from within its own nation concerning Roman Catholicism’s threat to the Protestant establishment, which is addressed at least in part by Ussher’s debate against Fitzsimon and the production of a clearly Reformed confession of faith, as the century progressed, it faced the external challenge of the Church of England hierarchy attempting to impose at least a dilution of Reformed theology if not an Arminianizing trend. This problem was clearest in Ussher’s confrontation with Laudianism.

Charles I’s reign contained more than its fair share of dispute and warfare. In contrast to his father, James I, he managed to alienate the religious and political establishments, imposing his position more than navigating the issues.⁴¹ His approach to rule, whatever way historians interpret the religious and political causes, certainly prompted the English civil war. Within Charles’s reign, his appointment of William Laud (1573–1645) as the Archbishop of Canterbury stands out as a prominent event in his contributions to religious controversies.

³⁸ Harrison Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works: James Ussher and the Reformed Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 6.

³⁹ E.g., Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works*, 6–10.

⁴⁰ Ford’s review is uncalibrated on a few points, such as spending more space analyzing social media than my actual book and in claiming that Richard Snoddy is correct and I am not when Snoddy and I are in agreement.

⁴¹ Richard Cust, *Charles I: A Political Life* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Laud's regime as archbishop, beginning in 1633, was seen as a victory for militant Arminianism and the efforts to suppress predestinarianism in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Laud and Charles set a strident agenda for promoting royal supremacy, including targeting predestinarian preaching, which they worried interfered with that agenda. The increasing pattern within established religion was to prioritize the church's sacramental ministry *at the expense of its preaching ministry*, setting a pressurized context of conflict within the establishment where those of Reformed conviction, especially concerning the preached word, were marginalized as they felt the rising emphasis on ceremonialism displaced their theology of salvation by grace alone.⁴² Although ever a moderate, Ussher certainly made his contribution to this controversy.

Ussher's role in protecting Reformed developments has a dimension that is both theological and ecclesiastical. Theologically, Ussher worked to protect and foster the predestinarian cause within the established church mainly through his publications, especially his treatment of the ninth-century monk Gottschalk in his *Gottschalk and the Predestination Controversy*.⁴³ In this book, as well as a few other works, he argued that predestination is part of Christianity's ecumenical heritage so should not be suppressed as if it were a controversial topic, a clear implication from the times it was wrongly suppressed in the past. As I have already presented Ussher's theological contribution elsewhere, this essay focuses now on ecclesiastical developments in the Church of Ireland that show maneuvers to protect its Reformed commitments.⁴⁴

Ussher's ecclesiastical efforts to maintain Reformed doctrine during the Laudian period focused on the development of Irish canon law. In the early seventeenth century, the Church of Ireland had kept a lax practice of enforcing uniformity among the clergy, primarily to maintain ministers who could help promote the Protestant cause among a predominantly Roman Catholic population. Whereas the adoption of new canon law in England in 1604 resulted in the debates concerning conformity and non-conformity that, as Gerald Bray argued, "continued to be the motivating force behind most of the controversies that disturbed the English Church

⁴² Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of Arminianism, c. 1590–1640*, Oxford Historical Monographs (1987; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 181–245; David R. Como, "Predestination and Political Conflict in Laud's London," *The Historical Journal* 46.2 (2003): 263–94; Peter Lake, "'Puritans' and 'Anglicans' in the History of the Post-Reformation English Church," in *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, ed. Milton, 1:352–79.

⁴³ James Ussher, *Gotteschalci et Predestinatianae Controversiae* (Dublin, 1631).

⁴⁴ Perkins, *Catholicity and the Covenant of Works*, 126–65.

for the next century and a half,” Ireland neither had canon law nor felt entirely under the jurisdiction of England’s.⁴⁵ Indeed, the nature of England’s authority in Ireland was hotly contested: historians still debate whether Ireland was an independent kingdom under the English monarch’s reign or more akin to a colony connected to the realm of England. Much of this tension remained indifferent for Ussher’s purposes in the early 1600s but became increasingly problematic for him during Laud’s tenure as archbishop. In 1634, Thomas Wentworth (1593–1641) arrived in Ireland as the first Earl of Strafford, and John Bramhall (1594–1663) as the Bishop of Derry, both being sent to help further Ireland’s political and ecclesiastical uniformity with England. Although he thought Ussher was amiable to his policies and efforts, Wentworth increasingly sidelined Ussher’s authority, alienating him in the process. This misstep became obvious and relevant when Laud and Wentworth attempted to replace the Irish Articles with England’s Thirty-Nine Articles and install England’s canon law as authoritative for the Church of Ireland at the 1634 convocation. Ford has well recounted the intricacies of the background to the Church of Ireland’s production of her own canon law, highlighting the tensions between Ussher and Laud about the Church of Ireland’s independence from the Church of England.⁴⁶

The theological issues are clearer from the content of Ireland’s canon law. Even its opening statement notes the Church of Ireland’s agency in the matter, noting the canons are for the “manifestation of *our* agreement with the Church of England,” occurring as “We do receive and approve” the Thirty-Nine Articles.⁴⁷ Ireland’s practice was certainly Anglican, prescribing keeping Sunday as the Lord’s Day as well as any other holy day determined by the church’s orders, which directly followed English canon law.⁴⁸ All the same, Ireland omitted several canons from English law that condemned those who impugned the Thirty-Nine Articles, English ceremonies, and other English forms, as well as England’s mandates about litanies and services in the colleges.⁴⁹ The leeway for criticism of England’s practices, the unstated freedom not to be bound to them, is marked.

⁴⁵ Gerald Bray, “Canon Law and the Church of England,” in *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, ed. Milton, 1:169.

⁴⁶ Ford, *James Ussher*, 175–207.

⁴⁷ [Church of Ireland], *Constitutions, and Canons Ecclesiastical* (Dublin, 1635), canon I (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ [Ireland], *Canons Ecclesiastical*, canon VI; [Church of England], *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical* (London, 1604), canon XIII.

⁴⁹ [England], *Canons Ecclesiastical*, canons IV–VIII, XV–XVII; Bray, “Canon Law and the Church of England,” 181–82.

The tendency to follow England's canons but omit or even supplement them according to Ireland's, at least Ussher's, interest to subvert Laudian emphases in favor of traditionally Reformed concerns is a consistent feature of Ireland's seventeenth-century canon law. Ireland added the requirements, not included in English law, that ministers spend time every Sunday catechizing and instructing in faith doctrines.⁵⁰ Ussher was likely closely connected to the development of these canons. He promoted and performed the practice personally, as he instructed Oxford divinity students in his 1643–44 lectures: "Preach the body of Divinity (the 52 heads) over once a yeare, or as soon as you can."⁵¹ His and the Church of Ireland's care for doctrinal instruction was a distinct mark of their theological emphases and their concern to further their more thoroughly Reformed confessional outlook.

On many matters of infrastructure and ministerial examination, Ireland followed if not simply repeated England's canons. Nonetheless, they omitted the canon requiring ministers to subscribe to three articles affirming the king's supremacy in temporal and ecclesiastical affairs, that the Book of Common Prayer contains nothing contrary to God's word, and that England's Thirty-Nine Articles are agreeable to God's word.⁵² The second article was particularly notable since Ussher always argued for royal supremacy and had included the Thirty-Nine Articles—supplemented with more specific statements of Reformed doctrines—in the Irish Articles.⁵³ Although Ussher used the Book of Common Prayer, omission of this article allowed other ministers in Ireland not to state their full allegiance to it. Perhaps most notably, Ireland omitted England's lengthy canon defending the use of the sign of the cross at baptism, which had always been a debated issue for Reformed-minded clergy, including Ussher.⁵⁴

The development of canon law in Ireland highlights its Anglican and Reformed identity, suggesting those traits were never in principled conflict. The establishment of ecclesiastical canons in Ireland in many ways followed England's but supplemented or departed from them on issues where some clergy felt Reformed commitments or Ireland's ecclesiastical independence

⁵⁰ [Ireland], *Canons Ecclesiastical*, canons XI–XII.

⁵¹ Queen's College, Oxford MS 217, fol. 41v; Perkins, "Ussher's Reading List," 25.

⁵² [England], *Canons Ecclesiastical*, canon XXXVI.

⁵³ Bray, "Canon Law and the Church of England," 177–78; on Ussher's royalism, see Ian W. S. Campbell, "Calvinist Absolutism: Archbishop James Ussher and Royal Power," *Journal of British Studies* 53 (July 2014): 588–610.

⁵⁴ [England], *Canons Ecclesiastical*, canon XXX; e.g., *The Correspondence of James Ussher, 1600–56*, ed. Elizabethanne Boran (Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2015), 1:250 (letter to John Selden dated April 16, 1622).

was undermined. As with the Irish Articles, which largely followed the Thirty-Nine Articles but with a markedly more Reformed voice on doctrinal controversies and developments, Ireland's canon law too maintained a statement of Anglican values and institutional standards while also making room for theology and practice less welcomed and increasingly excluded under Laud's oversight. In the seventeenth century, the Church of Ireland was then intentionally, not accidentally, committed to doctrine and conformity, making it institutionally very Anglican and Reformed.

III. *New Insights on Ussher's Reformed Contributions*

We have focused on Ussher's ministry in Ireland, in which he worked to further Reformed theology within his own established Church of Ireland. Given the limitation of this article, we have summarized the issues, hinting at primary sources rather than exploring them in depth. One of the more provocative aspects is certainly our confidence in Ussher's relationship to the Irish Articles. This section, however, highlights a forthcoming volume that substantiates Ussher's thoroughly Reformed commitments, drawing connections to every period of his career.

Scholars who research Ussher have known for some time that any serious study about him must engage with his manuscript sources. He left mountains of personal papers that are now housed in Trinity College Dublin, the Bodleian Library, and Cambridge University Library. The forthcoming volume, *On the Nature and Kingdom of God*, contains a new critical edition with translation from the Latin of three documents, two of which have never before been published.⁵⁵

This edition of Ussher's manuscripts features his most theologically oriented papers. It includes from early in his career the handwritten draft of his well-known catechetical work, *The Principles of the Christian Religion*. Although it was originally published in 1645 without his permission, Ussher revised this work in 1653, leaving us with one of his final theological statements.⁵⁶ This edition collates all the printed editions, notes how they differ

⁵⁵ Harrison Perkins, ed., *On the Nature and Kingdom of God: James Ussher's Theological Manuscripts* (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁶ James Ussher, *The Principles of Christian Religion: Sumarily Set downe according to the word of God: Together with A Brief Epitomie of the Bodie of Divinity* (London, 1645); *The Principles of the Christian Religion: Summarily sett downe according to the Word of God: Together with a Briefe Epitomie of the Body of Divinitie* (London, 1647); *The Principles of the Christian Religion: Summarily sett downe according to the Word of God: Together, with a Briefe Epitomie of the Body of Divinity* (London, 1650); *The Principles of Christian Religion with a Brief Method the Doctrine thereof. Now Fully Corrected and much enlarged by the Author* (London, 1653).

from the original draft, and comments on any substantive changes in Ussher's views. This volume includes another document dating from early in his career, namely the rough draft of the Irish Articles in Ussher's handwriting, which—especially combined with this document's extensive dependence upon Ussher's other works—proves the traditional position that he was the confession's primary author. Whereas my book is the first and only study to cite this document, the upcoming publication provides its first translation with an extensive introduction and a commentary defending its origins and documenting its demonstrable connections both to Ussher's confirmed works and the published Irish Articles. Finally, this volume also includes the first translation of Ussher's theological lectures, which he delivered in Oxford during 1643–1644. These lectures reflect nearly identical content to his other theological writings from early in his career, demonstrating his lasting commitments to the same Reformed theology contained in his Irish Articles.

Conclusion

This essay argues that Ussher's career in the Church of Ireland marks a period in which Irish Anglicanism was committedly Reformed. Global Anglicanism may have long had a nebulous and changing theological and ecclesiastical face. Still, Ussher's efforts in Ireland show that Reformed theology is *at least* one part of Anglicanism's heritage. The upcoming release of newly found and translated manuscript sources not only confirms his Reformed commitments for Ireland but also shows how he disseminated them in the university context in England, suggesting that English clergymen were also open to a thoroughly Reformed version of divinity. The implications for global Anglicanism today are beyond this essay's scope but nonetheless important as we consider Anglicanism's roots, its original theological commitments, and the turns it has taken over the centuries. Today, as Anglicanism is split among progressives, Anglo-Catholics, and often antidoctrinal, exegesis-only Low Church Evangelicals, arguably one of its steadier guides should be Ussher.