

Harro Höpfl. *Jesuit Political Thought: The Society of Jesus and the State, C. 1540-1630*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. 406 S. £55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83779-8.

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Prudence, Obedience, and Order: The Jesuit Conception of Political Authority

Höpfl's book spans a turbulent period of political history in Europe, encompassing moments of political crisis from the Peace of Augsburg and the Oath of Allegiance controversy, up to and beyond the assassination of Henri IV, in an intelligent and exhaustive analysis. The book is a valuable addition to the relatively insubstantial historiography on the Society of Jesus in this period, surveying the intellectual contribution of the Society's headliners such as Francisco Suarez, Gabriel Vasquez, Robert Persons, and Juan de Mariana. One of its great strengths is Höpfl's willingness to also excavate the work of some lesser-known Jesuits such as Thomas Fitzherbert, Adam Contzen, Leonard Lessius, and Martin Becanus. In his decision to wrest the image of Jesuit thinkers away from the contemporary accusations of its "hysterical opponents" of anarchy and irreverence towards monarchical rule, Höpfl provides the reader with fresh and provocative insights into the political theories produced by the Society (p. 1). His measured picture of the Jesuits as the proponents of order and obedience is one that will no doubt form the basis for fruitful further debate.

Höpfl outlines, in the first four chapters, the nature of the Jesuit confrontation with the political sphere and reassures the reader that although the Society's founder, Ignatius Loyola, had forbidden his followers to meddle in "worldly affairs," evidently this did not prevent them from constituting a considerable intellectual force in contemporary politics (chapter 3). In these opening chapters, Höpfl provides his reader with a firm grasp of the political, educational, and social context of the Society's contribution to political thought in the early modern period,

whilst at the same time setting up the major themes to which he returns throughout the book. The concept of good order in political society, and its association with obedience is, Höpfl argues, central to Jesuit notions of that which constitutes a harmonious political community. Höpfl establishes early on an image of the Jesuits as conservative royalists, not the anarchic supporters of political assassination we might presume them to be.

In chapter 5 Höpfl proposes the idea that "most" Jesuits were supporters of absolute monarchy (p. 88), a fact that may come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the work of, for example, Robert Persons or Juan de Mariana. Certainly it is a fair point to make that the Jesuits were, like even the most radical writers of the early modern period such as George Buchanan or Jean Boucher, inclined to favor monarchy as the best constitution. Whether they could all be considered to support "absolute" monarchy is a question that deserves further attention. It would be interesting to know, for example, how Höpfl would respond to Persons's argument in his *Conference*, a work Höpfl references frequently, that "the power and authority which the Prince hath from the commonwealth is in very truth, not absolute, but *potestas vicaria* or *deligata*." [1] By Persons's account the prince is a delegate of the commonwealth, chosen by the corporate body of the people as their representative. The commonwealth is the source of the prince's authority and thus retains the important deposing power, crucial for limiting the extent of that authority. Höpfl's attempts to convince his reader that Jesuit political thought tended towards absolutism are in this light perhaps not entirely successful.

The question of political tolerance dominated much of Jesuit political thought, and in chapter 6 to 8 Höpfl demonstrates how Jesuits came close to approximating reason of state, despite the association of the latter with “Machiavellian” politics, in their varying conclusions on this subject. Höpfl memorably accuses the Jesuits of “asset-stripping” reason of state (p. 140), and shows how over the question of political tolerance they could “justify both tolerance and persecution, depending on circumstances, on the basis of precisely those considerations that would commend themselves to a reason of state concerned with the maintenance of the prince’s state and civil tranquillity” (p. 139). In the debates over toleration policy, Höpfl considers the question of political order to outstrip that of orthodoxy, an emphasis which produces some interesting insights, such as the suggestion that Jesuits actually contributed to devolution of power away from the pope in favor of princes in the question of treaties (p. 161). Chapter 8 concludes this section with the argument that ultimately the Jesuits were unsuccessful in toying with reason of state, and ended up only compromising their own moral position.

In chapters 9 to 14, Höpfl moves to traditional ground, considering questions of legitimate authority, the influence of legal and scholastic arguments on Jesuit political thought, the authority of the pope versus the prince, and tyrannicide. In these chapters Höpfl continues to assert the importance of a well-defined political hierarchy in Jesuit thought, and the necessity of obedience to sovereign authority thus conferred. He also reiterates a point made by J. N. Figgis, that Jesuit thinkers contributed to the popularization of the notion that the church and state formed two independent spheres, with separate ends. The difficulty of this argument is that the notion of the papal *potestas indirecta* is rendered anomalous in Jesuit thought. The secular and spiritual spheres cannot be considered entirely separate if the pope is said to retain an emergency power to depose a heretical, or tyrannical, prince. Höpfl shows how the Jesuit argument breaks down into incoherency on this point, which if not a sympathetic judgement, certainly reflects the complexity of the relationship between the two spheres, a relationship that would bear further study.

A casualty resulting from Höpfl’s emphasis on political obedience is the importance of contract theory. Höpfl concedes in chapter 10 that a covenant was said to have existed at some point in time by most Jesuit thinkers, but denies that this produces a necessary contractual theory of government. He shows how Persons undermines his own argument by “slipping into” contractual vocabulary

in his *Conference* (p. 236). Höpfl argues that it is not the contractual character of kingship, but the “conditionality of the tenure of the kingly office” which is crucial for Persons. It is unclear why this should be at odds with the notion of contract between king and people, which would surely imply such conditionality. Höpfl concedes the only advantage of employing a contractual metaphor (and it is only permitted the status of a metaphor) “was that it suggested that non-performance on the one side freed the other side from its obligations, which is not the case with all relationships of mutual obligation (p. 237).” Perhaps it is not the case with *all* relationships of mutual obligation, but it is certainly the case with the type envisaged by Persons, who drew from a specific passage of canon law to make his argument.[2]

Another noticeable absence from Höpfl’s book is much reference to the way in which Jesuit political thought aligned, or not, with that of the rest of the Catholic community. The writers of the Catholic League, such as Jean Boucher and Guilielmus Rossaeus, certainly relied on Jesuit arguments in their work, and it would be interesting to know if the inverse was also true. One wonders how claustrophobic the Jesuit community was in terms of its political ideas, and how dependent on the arguments of contemporary Catholics. Given the scholastic origin of many central tenets of Jesuit political thought, any similarities would not be surprising. Perhaps Höpfl’s decision to emphasize the concept of obedience in Jesuit works explains his unwillingness to associate them with the undeniably radical views of the likes of Boucher.

Under Höpfl’s treatment Jesuit political theorists are rendered tame and obedient to political authority. Tyrannicide, for example, is declared a “surprising” association with the Jesuits. Furthermore, one of the most significant achievements of Jesuit political thought—the popularizing of the concept that political sovereignty is rooted in the commonwealth—is perhaps underemphasized. On the other hand, one of the many successes of Höpfl’s book is his decision to turn away from the ideas traditionally associated with the Jesuits, to produce a nuanced consideration of the way in which the ideas characterizing the Society from its foundations infiltrated its political thought.

Notes

[1]. Robert Persons, *A Conference about the next succession to the crowne of England*, by R. Doleman, 1594 (Menston: Scholar Press, 1972), 1.4, p. 73.

[2]. Persons, *Conference*, 1.4, pp. 73-74.

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