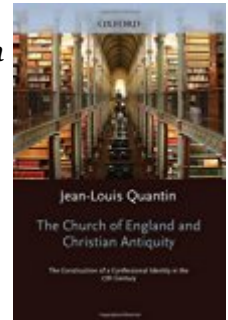


**Jean-Louis Quantin.** *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xii + 511 pp. \$175.00, e-book, ISBN 978-0-19-156534-2.



**Reviewed by** Sara Brooks

**Published on** H-Albion (October, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

Jean-Louis Quantin's thoroughly erudite book develops from recent historiography in the history of patristic scholarship. It critiques, and effectively corrects, a problematic, confessional view of Church of England identities regarding the role allotted to the early church. Anglicanism's "third way" has long claimed a distinctively strong link with Christian antiquity separating it from other spheres of Protestantism hatched in the magisterial Reformation. The claim has bedeviled historians of the pre-Tractarian Church of England, who saw no evidence of consensus in those centuries over the nature English Christianity's inheritance from the early church. Quantin instead argues that Anglican reverence for Christian antiquity came about only gradually through pragmatic scholarly reactions to the circumstances of the church. As useful as a long-awaited volume such as this is, its very synthesis points to new directions in the study of this area that are less subject to the current business of Anglican patristics.

Treating Church of England divinity from Thomas Cranmer to the end of the seventeenth

century, Quantin's analysis centers on the mid-seventeenth century as key to determining "when and how ... the appeal to the Fathers became central to the apologetics of the Church of England" (p. 18). Impressively handling a demanding range of authors and progressing through a series of close readings of pertinent works, Quantin advances an account of patristic use among Church of England conformists in three stages. First, Tudor de-prioritization saw fathers typified by a Calvinist style using stereotyped gobbets. As Calvinism became less prevalent in conformist circles through to the opening of the civil wars the value of patristic evidence was in particularly intense dispute. Finally, after 1660 patristic learning's value was not just affirmed but defended as special to Anglican identity. Quantin strengthens the case for patristics' role in the Restoration church's utter rejection of compromise with the presbyterian, lay, and enthusiastic elements of interregnum theology. The elevation of clerical specialization through asserting mastery of esoteric knowledge has rarely been so well accounted for.

The turning point of Quantin's account rests with English reactions to Jean Daillé's *On the Right Use of the Fathers* (1632; first English edition in 1651). Initially acclaimed, Daillé became a figurehead for what antagonistic conformists constructed as Calvinism's impoverished patristic culture. With Daillé Quantin is able to move from patristics visible only in interstices of other controversies to works whose central concern lay with the kind of security, in terms of the kind of knowledge, available from patristics. Quantin allies the conduct of this discussion to perceptions of competing Roman Catholic and Calvinist patristic cultures. There can be no doubt of English enthusiasm for avoiding either Roman or doctrinaire Calvinist Christianity in their church by the later seventeenth century. Still the story Quantin tells places the immediacy of theological/confessional rivalry before other goals typifying reform, such as purification in the church. The story provokes one to think about what could provide a foundation for a church formed around acute desire to avoid other positions.

It is impossible not to notice, as Quantin does, that much of the divinity in his account of the later seventeenth century left a very modest contemporary footprint. What Quantin ends up with is an English church located in the university; it was an institution whose consequence was only manifest among collections of learned men. He gives a convincing construction to how a church whose defensive disinclination to identify itself with its common parishioners bred up an inertial continuity in the eighteenth century without which Tractarian critiques would have had no bite.

The book delivers a synthetic narrative of patristic ideologies in line with current trends in the history of patristic scholarship, such as emphases on scholarly internationalism and a post-confessional approach. There can be no doubt that the target of this careful work is a certain variety of Anglican confessional scholarship. Much of the book's punch lies in the short shrift given to hardy

perennials of that history, like Richard Hooker and the early identification of the Church of England with the Greek Church. Quantin disallows the history written by later Anglicans who were keen to provide the Church of England with a history that would in fact reconnect it with other churches.

Confessional histories continue to be written as expressions of faith and intellectual conviction, as well as because confessions fade and fail without them. Perforce they are most interested how past fellows may yield aid or solace for current anxieties. Church of England historiography, however, has long labored with the difficulty that its confessional history has been perpetually intermingled with English and latterly British national historical narrative, especially where intellectual histories intersect with histories of nationalism. Of course early modern English history is only one case where historiographies of conversion on the one hand and dynastic history on the other flail about in ur-stories of nationalism. German history's checkered record on this point has similarly produced an ample revisionist historiography. This pattern has made history of the Reformation in England too often either embodied in or distracted by confabulatory urges to reify another familiar concept, *via media*, prematurely in the history of the English church. Notably, other areas of English cum British history have, at least since the advent of the critique of Whiggism (noted by Quantin, p. 13), been obligated to provide a narrative ostentatiously separate from the needs of engraving national identity in the English. To the extent that religion has escaped this constriction, it has consigned Anglican identity to the level romantic heritage-ism now often left in possession of this field.

Quantin has written a demanding book well, and will continue to publish on these subjects. The book's appearance now opens the field for works less tied to the problematic impositions of confessional needs on the intellectual history of

religion. Perforce these will critique the synthetic narrative Quantin has assembled; nevertheless, they will owe much to his work. I wish to suggest three such possible avenues to investigate: placing predecessor authority within broader audiences for churches development, considering how the state of theology at particular moments plays a part in dealing with secondary authority such as patristics, and examining the uneven adequacy of scripture to matters of building earthly institutions and the roles that genre can play in treating such material.

First, reform of the church was an intensely interactive process, not just individually, but institutionally. While Quantin's treatment yields a satisfying account of how situations and stakes within the church adopted patristic learning as a distinct sign of identity, it is less interested in how antiquity could be and was used to interact with nonclerical nonspecialists in the church's interest. Reformers understood the Reformation to be a purification effort both with and without precedent. In an obvious sense, the duration of papal control of the church made the recovery of a true faith and order an act not so much of memory as scholarship. However, to construct churches that would maintain the renewed Christianity as well as be institutionally and politically viable, antiquity was also a source of models. The clarity (or lack thereof) with which it was politically useful to report and reconstruct early Christianity was also a key part of the process of forming the church. After all, there is also a story about institutional memory at play. It is helpful to recall that nineteenth-century reformers in the church treated Restoration churchmanship as normative precisely because it stood in their crepuscular memory. It was the regime immediately previous to the one reformers sought to reject. Just as Constantinian churchmen sought to restore an untrammelled church after the nightmare of imperial persecution, a concept of referent purity just beyond com-

mon experience is a common touchstone of church reform.

It is also clear that the extent of practical doctrinal systematics available to scholars mattered significantly in their treatment of predecessors, including those from Christian antiquity. In other words, Daillé's provocative stance worked as well as it did because it had a systemic donkey on which to pin its tails. The phase of theological reform during which an author wrote made a necessarily large impact on how comprehensively or specifically patristics could be handled. Hence while discursive reform of patristic authority did occur even in the early 1520s, in terms of individual churches it may be useful to understand such debates as typical of a later phase of the intellectual formation in most religious institutions.

Next, the disposition of patristics in texts was never exclusively a competing form of authority contingent on ascribed clarity of scripture. Scriptural clarity varied by topic. In some areas, such as eschatology, fathers could offer little other than commentary. In others, such as Trinitarian theology and relations between church and state, it was difficult even for those who wished to construct a strict New Testament church and limit fathers to exegesis alone. Variant views of purity and corruption, expertise, and ignorance in the late antique field also have a role in shaping what English churchmen sought for their own church. In comparison to the late antique development of church institutions, the Reformation happened quite quickly. Some authors received startlingly rapid adoption as authorities; indeed, a great deal of anti-Calvinism plays on just this tension. It is worth considering how conscious reference to the institutional growth of the antique church whether in exegesis, history, or texts generated through ministry can add to the account of pragmatic scholarly response to the political and religious environment Quantin has given here.

Lastly, greater attention to the generic choices of writers may bear fruit in both when they write

on doctrine and on institutional disciplining. A prime example is the great deal of apologetics important to placing a religion and its institutions within society. Just as in the seventeenth-century study of antique apologetics arrived at a new sophistication regarding the origination of such early texts, Reformation apologetics carried a vitality drawn from the need to hastily construct new facades over religious content and cultic practices. Apologetics, however, is written to satisfy readers according to perspective. Treating apologetics demands acknowledgment of its responsive and disputatious nature. Students of the sixteenth and seventeenth century have a great advantage in access to both sides of a debate in a far greater proportion than is the case for earlier periods. Polemics typically avoid or elide synthesis in authorities, most often attacking text to text. Nevertheless, disputatious exchanges, perhaps most strikingly in ecclesiology, are a significant resource for assessing the role of Christian antiquity at its most integral to the lived process of reform. In effect, both the incidental and primary study and use of patristics were constantly at work in the political culture of divinity and the reasoning of divinity itself. When, however, patristic authority was itself controversial, texts tended to obscure the unevenness of more frequent topic-by-topic use.

Quantin's synthesis opens clear space for historians to disaggregate his picture outside of the synthetic pressures of confession and theology. It is clear that when examined within deep context the importance of fathers was not often capable of isolation from scholarly politics, let alone those of the church or state. The different complexion lent to patristic authorities in discrete controversies like Christ's descent into hell would always produce a different patristic profile from that of Eucharistic controversy and different again from subjects like the Trinity and ecclesiological disciplining in no little part because the parties with stakes in the outcome differed, as did the moments of dispute. Patristic resources carried a dif-

ferent heft depending on the subjects, *both intrinsic and contextual*, at hand.

By aiming to correct current confessional myths, Quantin has created a multifaceted resource for new directions in study of early modern protestant patristics. The most pressing way forward requires a determined focus on the conduct of religious politics as a sphere with several more players than learned theologians, or even educated controversialists, alone.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Sara Brooks. Review of Quantin, Jean-Louis. *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32395>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.