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Church, Book, and Bishop: Conflict and Authority in Early Latin Christianity

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Church, Book, and Bishop

CONFLICT AND AUTHORITY
IN EARLY LATIN CHRISTIANITY



Peter Iver Kaufman

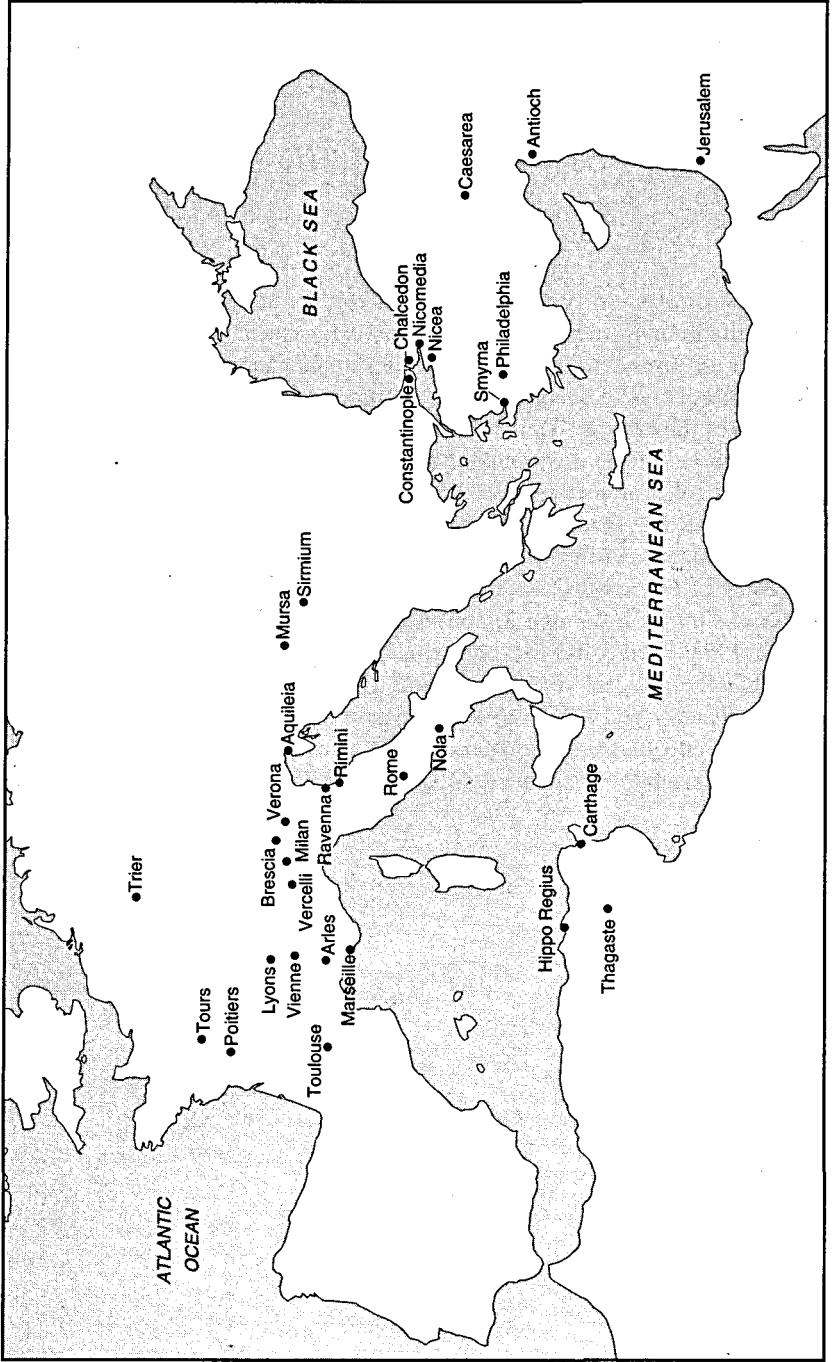
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Introduction

Cranbrook in Kent was a rather sleepy small town in 1583, slightly more than twenty miles southwest of Canterbury. Dudley Fenner was twenty-five when he arrived there that year, having just returned to England from Antwerp. He had been ordained a priest on the Continent yet was pleased to have been assigned a parish close to his birthplace. Later in the year, Bishop John Whitgift of Worcester came to Canterbury to be consecrated as archbishop, the principal administrator of the reformed English church. These two men were a mere twenty miles apart, but they did not see the same prospects when they looked back at Christian antiquity. Whitgift found that the apostles had been the church's first bishops. He and his friends inferred God had authorized the concentration of power in the church in the hands of a few able, distinguished administrators. Fenner protested that the earliest churches had been governed differently, more democratically. Popular consent had been required, elders consulted, councils called. Not one to pull his punches, Fenner pronounced that Whitgift and other apologists for the established church order in England, wanting to retain their salaries and privileges, "faleslie father[ed] upon the apostles . . . a false and bastard distinction of ministries."¹

Origins seem sacred in many, if not most, religions. What happens at the start and the meanings that originators give to what happens acquire tremendous authority. Appeals to the very beginnings of this or that practice argue for its continuation. Memories of the first shoots of an idea argue for its repetition and ramification. For nearly two millennia, Christians have been ascribing normative status to Christian antiquity, to all or the earliest part of the religion's first six centuries. Looking back is hard, Christians have learned; what was thought, done, and meant usually defies precise determination. And looking back is competitive, as Whitgift and Fenner discovered; those who search for origins must reinvent them while trying to reappropriate them.

My interests were like those of Fenner and Whitgift, though I was not looking to reappropriate, to find patterns in what was for what is or ought to be. Even so, disclaimers of this sort do not diminish all difficulties. Although historians may not have to contend with resistances to reappropriation, they must nevertheless narratively reinvent a past that has left only modest stocks of evidence, and they

must always compete with rival explanations. My interests in the early church's management strategies further complicated this enterprise because management is a monster category. It compasses liturgical and teaching responsibilities as well as political initiatives ranging from recrimination to reconciliation. To tame the monster, I tried to put many rituals and doctrines in contexts dominated by more overtly political strategies devised to keep order and maintain discipline, to prevent diversity from generating divisions and hostilities among Christians, and, when that failed, to resolve conflict and crisis.

If successful, *Church, Book, and Bishop* should register a sense of the challenges Christians faced as they sought to order their lives together in this world while awaiting their rewards in the next. And if successful, the book's many stories of conflict and resolution should suggest how and why Christians designated certain texts as sacred literature; how and why they interpreted select passages, traditions, and experiences to define and extend the reach of their churches; and how and why they distributed authority within those churches to elders (later priests) and bishops, whom I call "executives" to distinguish them from itinerant preachers and prophets whose attachments to local settled communities were generally more tenuous.

Strategies of selection, interpretation, and distribution can hardly be understood apart from the struggles that occasioned them. Sacred literature and leadership were initially defined in and by the struggles of small and sectlike communities to establish uniform doctrine, discipline, expectation, and organization. The jurisdictions of authorities within those communities were later determined by the struggles of churches and networks of churches to defend conformity against non-conformists and secessionists, to combat diversity and perceived novelty, and, to that end, to enforce policies of exclusion and reintegration. It was not my purpose to detail every struggle or give every known detail of any struggle. I did not try to be comprehensive because, in part, my students regularly informed me that too many strange-sounding names, faraway places, and long-ago dates obscured the drama of leadership development. So I set out to tell stories that would introduce and illustrate representative struggles and management strategies.

It is prudent, however, to be rather tentative about each story's representative status, for what most students perceive as an avalanche of names and dates historians know as a modest drift, and we know too little, for instance, about the fourth-century episcopacy to say that any single pontificate represents the others. I hope only that my stories and illustrations exhibit the virtues Annabel Patterson recently ascribed to the anecdotes of early modern chroniclers: that they "have a nonarbitrary relationship to the project" and "possess all the attributes of good fiction (shapeliness, thrift, vitality, the capacity to speak to social issues of importance, particularly those not yet fully or widely understood)." I can only hope that they "finesse the problem of *representativeness* by virtue of their *representational* solidity, their sense of being statistics come alive."²

I hope that *Church, Book, and Bishop* will be a congenial companion piece. It seeks no greater sphere. To get the largest possible picture of Christian antiquity,

readers must hear more directly from and about nonconformists and discuss doctrines, rehearse rituals, and interrogate theorists and texts unmentioned here. Readers may want to consult instructors, pastors, more compendious narratives, and, ideally, some of the specialized studies commended in the Suggestions for Further Reading. But this book will be a useful companion if it effectively blends with most stories of crisis, conflict, and consensus standard assessments and informed, revisionary guesses to discover how church, book, and bishop were defined and why they acquired such authority.³

Although I have tried to take into account what colleagues have learned from bottom-up interpretive approaches to the transfer of authority, imposition of discipline, and maintenance of congregational solidarity, this is a book about the elites. Chapter 1 investigates their formation in the first and second centuries. Chapter 2 scans the literary career of a late-second-century apologist for church authority and one of the more outspoken critics of those executives who wielded it, Tertullian of Carthage. Chapter 3 considers church leadership during the third and fourth centuries by examining several executives' responses to prominent, contested issues: the identity of Jesus, the relationship between Christianity and secular politics, the determination of standards for conduct becoming and unbecoming the Christian, and the nature and extent of penance and pardon. Chapter 4 belongs to Augustine of Hippo, who from 400 until his death thirty years later influentially adjusted the churches' frontiers, defining what it meant to be a member and an official in the universal church. All of the first four chapters report conversations and arguments about church, book, and bishop, but Chapters 2 and 4 concentrate, respectively, on the sacred book and the Catholic Church. Chapter 5 looks at how bishops managed conflicts and built consensus during the fifth and sixth centuries and at the increasing importance of the one apostolic see or seat of church government in the western portion of the empire, the church (and bishop) of Rome.

Church, Book, and Bishop, then, reviews a number of early arrangements and initiatives against nonconformity and anarchy, inspecting a series of executives' decisions to exclude or absorb Christians who trusted other than "the right" churches, canonical books, and orthodox bishops. Historians once imagined they could tell all and tell it objectively. At the very least, they thought they could retrieve and piece together enough information to give an integrated, accurate view of the past. Theirs was a splendid, "noble dream," as Peter Novick recently admitted in a study of the profession that was something of a wake-up call, a ringing repudiation of those dreamers' ambitions.⁴

Of course, we need not borrow Novick's lens to see that the ideals of objectivity, consensus, comprehensiveness, and closure or completion are under siege. We need only look at the sea of competing interpretations of nearly all historical phenomena or count the growing number of historians who have graduated from a discreet, sage, and candid acknowledgment of the problematic character of all historical knowledge (can we ever know?) to join the militantly critical assault on

the very possibility of historical knowledge (we can never know). The criteria for evaluating a historian's findings and the narratives that present them have never been less consensual than they are now. Indeed, it seems odd to be writing about early Christian integration and reintegration within, and with, a disintegrating discipline. Yet there are good reasons to press ahead—and to do so selectively and simply, because, as Novick insisted, overspecialization and “arcane terminology” contribute to historians' failures to communicate with all and cooperate with each other.

And, readers are those good reasons.

I do not presume readers' intense interest in the history of the early churches. Nor do I expect that readers are alike and that close resemblances would permit me to pose a family portrait on the other side of these pages. Yet would it be all that unfair or tremendously presumptuous to say that humans are irrepressibly historical and that reading makes them so? We read, as Fenner and Whitgift did, though perhaps not with their sense of purpose and urgency, to discover roots, origins, the whence as well as the whither, because the knowledge of origins and developments, as imperfect as it may be, often explains why, how, and even what. We are usually undeterred, then, by our intimation that stories written after the fact are prejudicial, that the after always plays havoc with the fact. Fascination survives our skepticism about the noble dream. No cure I know has yet been found for curiosity. And curiosity beckons our intuitive and imaginative powers, the exercise of which is good in and of itself, even if we are left only with a familiar, yet disagreeable sense of how much we may never know. Those materials from which historical narratives and seemingly substantiated conclusions are crafted defy conquest, but they compel lively conversation and endless argument.

And that, too, is an excellent reason to press ahead and look behind. Controversies over authority and leadership in the early churches enlivened the history of the Christian traditions in virtually every generation. Fenner and Whitgift could hardly be called exceptional. To be sure, the ground has shifted since their time and tussle, but it is still contested. *Church, Book, and Bishop* intends to specify where some contemporary scholars stand and to volunteer a few fresh interpretations of an elite's predispositions and behaviors. The principal objective, however, is to kindle readers' curiosity and invite their contributions to the conversation about the nature and distribution of religious authority.

I work from texts and think of them as working texts because they do not lay back, so to speak, and reflect prepackaged parts of culture—namely, what happened or was happening around them. Involved and almost unconscionably abstract theological treatises, businesslike and confessional correspondence, admiring lives of saints, and angry, extended accusations shaped what happened, tried to affect what would happen, composed cultures, and contained (in both senses of the word) antagonisms and anxieties of which the authors may have been only partially aware.

Historians have to locate contexts to decode texts, to save those texts from superficial readings but also to keep them from becoming infinitely interpretable.

But here is the rub: We learn about contexts by decoding texts, artifacts, sites, and silences. Contexts are little more than what we are able to tease, extort, and accumulate from texts of all kinds. But must we circle until driven by dizziness to a standstill? Or are we on the threshold of an adventure requiring a constant commerce between texts and plausible contexts? The dilemma will either paralyze us or launch us into a process of relentless correction and argument with our archives, our colleagues, and ourselves.

I vote against paralysis. I mentioned the circularity only to lift the hood for a moment and remind readers of the difficulties that historical narratives, present company included, will often screen. Other difficulties will arise; they are featured in what follows. They are not the difficulties and dilemmas of historians but those of the churches' executives. So the hood must now close, the latch click, so we can press forward with conflict management, leadership, and authority—with church, book, and bishop—in early Latin Christianity.