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Tim Cooper: Fear and Polemic in Seventeenth-Century England. Richard Baxter and Antinomianism, Aldershot: Ashgate 2001, 248 S., ISBN 0-7546-0301-6, GBP 45,00

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In his study of Richard Baxter and Antinomianism, Tim Cooper opens with a question posed in 1653 by Thomas Hill. "Be entreated", asked Hill of Baxter, "to hint to me what are the grand Antinomian opinions you ayme at, when you (soe often) decry such a thing as Antinomianisme". In essence, Cooper's work is an attempt to answer the same question, not just as Baxter might have answered it, but how the question might have been understood in the context of the "combustible mixture of the man and his world". The difficulty faced by Cooper is that both subject and object, both Baxter and his theological bugbear of Antinomianism, never really seemed to stay in place long enough to sketch a reliable likeness. Baxter was one of the most prolific English authors of the age; he wrote over 150 books, the largest reaching to one million words, the total corpus comprising over ten million. He published works of soteriology, ecclesiology, politics, apologetics, history, and pastoral theology; but he did not write systematically, building temples of religious thought. Baxter's work was usually a response to the immediate issues of the day, and much of Cooper's analysis looks to retrace the points of intersection and the different levels of influence that conditioned his dialogue with the Antinomians. Just as complex were the structures of the debate and the dynamics of the theological exchange. Cooper speaks of the way words would change their original meanings in the heat of rhetorical battle, the most evident being the tactic of "structural inversion", when positive values were reinforced by denouncing their opposites (as in "godliness" and "popery") or synonymous association, as when Baxter hitched both Antinomians and Libertines to the same cart. Words, meanings, and intentions changed with the decades and the authors, and it is difficult to establish with any certainty *what* people like Baxter meant by the term Antinomianism and *why* they were so enraged by its teachings. But this is the point of the work. As Cooper puts it, "the real interest is not so much in the description of the Antinomians, but why contemporaries chose to construct that definition in the way that they did" (7).

Fear and Polemic in Seventeenth-Century England is divided into two parts: the first investigates the three strands that conditioned Baxter's dialogue with Antinomianism (in brief, "personality, polemic, and fear"), while the second puts the debate into its historical context. Beginning with the controversy itself, Cooper opens with a discussion of the rise of Antinomianism in Reformation Germany. The basic issue concerned the

extent to which mankind could contribute to salvation. Early in his career, Luther went to great lengths to emphasize the passivity of the believer in justification; the Law did not help, mankind could do nothing "but sin and be damned", and salvation had nothing to do with an individual's efforts but rather solely and completely with Christ's. Later, as his mature theology detailed his understanding of the twofold nature of mankind (righteous and sinner at once), Luther stressed the need for the Law as long as the flesh remains (that is, until death), and he stressed repeatedly the need to honour the Law, for without it sin would triumph and the gospel would fall. Later theologians, however, and in particular Johann Agricola, returned to the early teaching and developed a theology which placed extreme stress on the role of faith alone which (when taken to extremes) denied the need for any form of moral observance or good works. It was this dual legacy of German Lutheranism, rather than later English extrapolations, that was the lifeblood of the dispute. "Without realizing that there were, in a sense, two Luthers", observes Cooper, "the whole muddle of the seventeenth-century English Antinomian debate must remain a mystery. Luther is the important figure here, not the Antinomians" (20). And yet few Protestant cultures were so divided over passive and active justification as Stuart England. This was due in part to the growing climate of antagonism brought on by the strong moralism of the English Puritans. So-called Antinomians began to rise up against the Puritan insistence on legalism, for in their eyes it afforded the believer too great a role in salvation and Christ too little. But equally as significant for the emergence of the debate was the tenor of the times: Antinomianism surfaced as a central concern in the 1640s, at a stage when the social and political world in England was in disorder and the provinces were home to increasing numbers of religious sects.

Richard Baxter was not the type of man who could rest quietly amid disorder. A Puritan at heart, in the sense that he was constantly compelled to correct the faults of others, he rarely doubted he was right, seldom considered the opinions of his opponents, and completely lacked tact and compassion in his dealings with men. Moreover, he was famously combative. Colleagues constantly admonished him to soften his language, often asking that he show more grace, tolerance, and understanding. Enemies and antagonists simply held him to account for the lack of Christian spirit, referring to him as dogmatic, magisterial, and unbrotherly in his manner. As one critic put it, he was "an Everlasting Argument". Baxter was thus naturally disposed to take up his pen against the Antinomians; he was, however, less inclined to bring any disagreement - especially this disagreement - to a close, unless he had battered his opponents into submission and effected some sort of conversion. Apologies and admissions came rarely to Baxter, a rather unchristian trait never far from his mind. "It is my griefe", he wrote, "that I can do no worke of God but somewhat of selfe is droppinge in" (51). No doubt his sense of duty was amplified due to the fact that as a practicing minister his main concern, as he put it, was the "waking" and "working" implications of any abstract body of religious thought. He could not put any distance between the abstract outlines of Protestant theology and the consequences for Christian practice.

In the final section of the first part of the book ("polemic"), Cooper examines the initial phase of Baxter's debate with the Antinomians. The two preceding chapters have set the stage for the analysis: on the one hand there is the phenomenon of Antinomianism, vague and fluid in its teachings; on the other there is the dogmatic figure of Richard Baxter and his partiality for aggressive debate. Theologically, the most offensive aspect of Antinomian teaching in Baxter's mind was strict imputation, the idea that all sin was imputed to Christ and thus (by implication) the Elect had been justified from eternity. This was the root of all their errors, as he saw it, for it vitiated the role played by Christ and the gospel and it spoke only of passive faith, unconditional salvation, and a denial of all sin. Mankind becomes its own redeemer, for as the Elect had been acquitted from sin from eternity they become as perfect as Christ himself. This was indeed a radical doctrine, but it did not reflect the teaching of the Antinomians (who did not reject the preaching of the Law or suggest that man was without sin); rather it was a distortion fashioned by Baxter, a deliberate rhetorical construct which sought to discredit the Antinomians by associating them with extremes. And once again Baxter's fear was aroused by the pastoral implications of the doctrine. As Cooper illustrates, his main objection was rooted in his conviction that there would be no obedience without the Law; Antinomianism militated against the whole fabric of Christianity and would lead to ungodly lives. Baxter spelled this out in theological detail in *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649), a work so unforgiving in its attack on Antinomianism it prompted some commentators to suggest he had turned to Catholicism. In *Aphorismes*, Baxter first laid bare the essentials of his soteriology and his conviction that salvation was accomplished by degrees. "Justification is not a momentaneous Act", he wrote, "begun and ended immediately upon our Believing: but a continued Act; which though it be in its kind compleate from the first, yet it is still in doing, till the finall Justification at the Judgement day" (77). In this statement it is clear to see how deeply rooted his theology was in his vision of "practical Christianity" and thus why the spectre of Antinomianism (as he understood it) threatened the very existence of the English church.

Fundamental for Cooper's analysis, and detailed with clarity in the second half of the book, is the historical setting. Although it never disappeared entirely, Baxter's obsession with Antinomianism was not perennial; it tended to wax and wane in tow with national and personal events. In the 1640s, for instance, the first and most intense phase of his anxiety and the stage when he developed his mature soteriological position, Baxter was working as a preacher in the parliamentary army. In his experience, all was dislocation, chaos, and violence; later in life he would look back to this period and recall "days of common sufferings, when nothing appears to our sight but ruin; families ruined, congregations ruined; sumptuous structures ruined; cities ruined; country ruined; court ruined; kingdoms ruined [...]" (91). It was during this period of history, in this state of mind, and after suffering a near-fatal illness, that Baxter experienced his "soteriological conversion" and began to write so implacably against the

Antinomians. *Aphorismes of Justification* emerged during these years, and much of his later career would be spent justifying the severe charges he made in that work. In the 1650s, however, with the war at an end and back serving his congregation in Kidderminster, the inner storm began to subside. Baxter no longer wrote with such intensity, and he no longer directed his diatribes at named individuals; rather, his interpretation of Antinomianism assumed a more general, academic air, and he even went so far as to suggest that the sect had been something of a blessing for the English church, for it had forced its ministers to make more rigorous use of the Law. In part, Baxter had been lulled by the times: the war was over and religious radicalism was on the wane. But he had also grown convinced that the battle against the Antinomians (his battle) had been won. He spoke of them in the past tense, and sought quarrels with Catholics and Epicureans instead. But his sense of victory was premature. At the start of the 1670s, with work afoot for a reconciliation of the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and the bishops of the English church, Baxter once again sensed the rise of the Antinomians. Cooper puts this down to obsession rather than any realistic measure of the times - "a polemic construct of his own invention"; nevertheless, the new threat seemed tangible enough to warrant a list of 58 misguided soteriological assertions held by the Antinomians in his *Life of Faith* (1670), and he was quick to recall the horrors of the Civil War and associate them with teaching of John Saltmarsh and Tobias Crisp. The real issue at this stage, Cooper suggests, was Baxter's fear of religious pluralism. He was using Antinomianism as "a stick with which he could beat the Independents", and he now drew on his arsenal of the 1640s to discredit rather than to condemn a theological position. "It was a weapon designed primarily to slur an opponent", observes Cooper, "rather than to provide an accurate assessment of his theology" (169). It was rhetoric rather than conviction.

Richard Baxter's concern with Antinomianism did not end in the 1670s. As late as 1690, one year before his death, he launched a final attack in response to the appearance of the complete works of Tobias Crisp (published posthumously by his son). To the end Baxter remained "anti-Antinomian", even if his convictions tended to fluctuate over the years. It is this fluctuation which most interests Cooper, and by focussing on Baxter and his dialogue with Antinomianism he has written a study which sheds considerable light on how closely theological ideas could be tied to personal experience. Above all, it reveals how historical forces (personal and collective) could affect religious perception and just how fluid the notion of Protestantism still was in England more than a century after the Reformation. As Cooper illustrates, Antinomianism was not a fixed doctrine but a very imprecise term, used for the most part to exclude rather than define; there was still limited consensus among English Protestants during this period, as Antinomians, no less than Anglicans and Puritans, could claim with some justice to be the true heirs of the Reformation; and religion was always more than just the defence or condemnation of abstract doctrine: Baxter was evidence of this, as his soteriology changed as his circumstances changed, from the campsites of the Civil War to the parish of Kidderminster. Cooper's work on Baxter does an excellent job of balancing the theological culture of post-

Reformation England with the details of Baxter's personal history. There are lessons here for all historians of religious culture in the seventeenth century.

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