RICHARD BAXTER ON CHRISTIAN UNITY:
A CHAPTER IN THE ENLIGHTENING OF
ENGLISH REFORMED ORTHODOXY*

CARL R. TRUEMAN

In 1707 a group of non-conformist ministers made a fateful decision that was to have a dramatic effect upon the way in which the great Puritan divine, Richard Baxter, would be known to posterity. Their action effectively divorced Baxter's thought from the context of its times and more or less guaranteed that his reputation for subsequent generations would not be that which he himself would have chosen, or perhaps even recognized. This decision separated his so-called practical works from the rest and arranged that only the former should be republished. The result was four huge tomes of writings, covering everything from conversion through catechising to Christian household management. While the tomes were indeed huge, however, they actually represented less than half of what Baxter wrote in his lifetime and excluded precisely those doctrinal works upon which Baxter himself hoped that his reputation would come to rest.

The practical writings certainly struck a chord with the English-speaking public. Several editions were published over the subsequent centuries, most recently in the early 1990s. The particular brand of piety which they contained also proved popular in the Highlands of Scotland, where the practical writings enjoyed translation into Gaelic and came to form part of the

Carl R. Truman teaches historical theology in the Department of Divinity at the University of Aberdeen.

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literary culture of the legalistic wing of Scottish Presbyterianism.² Indeed, so closely did Baxter's practical writings come to be identified with the legalism of Victorian non-conformity that, in The Mill on the Floss, George Eliot underlined the pharisaism of the nauseating Mrs Glegg by noting that she read Baxter's Saints' Everlasting Rest "on wet Sunday mornings—or when she heard of a death in the family—or when . . . her quarrel with Mr Glegg had been set an octave higher than usual."³

The resulting popular picture of Baxter, to friend and foe alike, is that of a man who was fundamentally concerned with the practical life and experience of the Christian believer, a pietist avant la lettre. This image has often been combined at a popular level with the notion that Baxter was the calm man of tolerance, the one who sought a middle-way between Arminianism and Reformed Orthodoxy as a means of promoting church unity—a view which has reinforced the image of him as a pietistic writer more concerned about experience and life than about the precise niceties of doctrinal disputes.⁴

Such a picture, however, does Baxter an injustice, divorcing his practical writings from his life and works as a whole and divorcing his thought from its wider context in what was possibly the most turbulent century in English history. Baxter's image as a non-doctrinaire pietist cannot be sustained in the light of his doctrinal works; and his reputation for tolerant ecumenism cannot be sustained when his campaign for church unity is set against the backdrop of Civil War, Commonwealth, and Restoration.

Baxter's thinking on church unity is a highly complex subject, and this paper examines two aspects: the external social and political factors which shaped his views in this area; and the kind of theology and theological method which he used to develop his view of what it meant to be a "meere Catholick." The two sides are inevitably not unrelated, and tell us much about Baxter the Puritan theologian in the seventeenth century; but they also reveal some of the fundamental ambiguities of his thought which are indicative of the transitional nature of his theology, forming as it does a tenuous bridge between the old and the new in the intellectual life of England.⁵

² I am grateful to Donald Meek, Professor of Celtic at the University of Aberdeen, for bringing this to my attention.
⁴ This would certainly appear to be the case from the eighteenth century onwards, where a strong pietistic tradition looked back to his practical works for inspiration: see Geoffrey E. Nuttall, Richard Baxter and Philip Doddridge: A Study in Tradition (London: Oxford University Press, 1951). Nuttall himself is very sympathetic to the pietist analysis: for him, Baxter is the one who "constantly writes out of experience and from his heart," ibid, 13. In his biography, he also underplays the strongly anti-Romanist dimension of his pursuit of church unity: e.g., Richard Baxter, 121, 122.
⁵ The relationship between Puritanism and Enlightenment is a highly complex one. Those such as Christopher Hill who operate with a Marxian view of history and see the Puritans as representative of the rising bourgeoisie and the Civil War as essentially a class struggle are
I. Baxter on Church Unity: the Historical Context

The key to unlocking Baxter’s thinking on church unity lies in his experience and understanding of the most cataclysmic event in England in the seventeenth century: the Civil War. The question of Baxter’s attitude to, and interpretation of, the Civil War has been obscured somewhat by the fact that his well-known later writings contain much hand-wringing and regret over the events of the 1640s, implying that he quickly became a disillusioned, if not reluctant, Parliamentarian, and his major statement on the war, his *A Holy Commonwealth* of 1659, which offered a more positive assessment of the conflict, remained an obscure treatise and never enjoyed popular appeal. The picture is made yet more complex by the fact that Baxter later repudiated this treatise in public in 1670, while continuing to recommend it in private as necessary reading for understanding the Civil War. Thus, in the preface to *A Christian Directory* in 1673, he states that the section on political theory is emphatically not the same work as in *A Holy Commonwealth* which he had recently repudiated. Yet in the same year he recommends the book to one Edmund Hough who is writing a history of the Civil War.

The reasons for Baxter’s apparent schizophrenia over the book are somewhat obscure, but the importance of them for understanding why Baxter inclined to regard Puritanism as an early modern movement whose ideology reflected this essential modernity: see his *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965). More recently “revisionist” historians such as Conrad Russell have called into question the central importance of social and economic class for the Civil War and have thus recast it not as one of the first of the bourgeois revolutions but as one of the last of the wars of religion: see Russell’s *The Causes of the English Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). A parallel shift has been taking place in the discipline of the history of ideas with reference to studies of continental Reformed Orthodoxy. Previous scholarship saw the rise of Reformed Orthodoxy, with its increased use of scholastic argumentation and structure, as indicative of an incipient rationalism at work within Protestant theology and thus as adumbrating later Enlightenment emphases: see, for example, Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) and Ernst Bizer, *Früortho­daxie und Rationalismus* (Zurich: EVZ, 1963). Of late this view has been subjected to vigorous criticism by scholars who point to the fundamentally pre-modern presuppositions of Reformed Orthodoxy and the equivocal use by previous scholars of the word, “rationalism,” and its cognates when applied to differing historical periods: see Richard A. Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics I: Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998). Analysing the intellectual content of Puritanism, and tracing the intellectual relationship between Puritanism and Enlightenment is rendered difficult by the fact that the Puritans were excluded from English universities in the early 1660s, some time before the Enlightenment had any significant impact on English university curricula: see Trueman, *Claims of Truth*, 1-46.


8 *A Holy Commonwealth*, xix-xx; Calendar, no. 906.
chose to support the Parliamentary cause can scarcely be underestimated and, as I will argue, provide at least one point of continuity between the early and later phases of Baxter’s political thought. While his positive political views may undergo significant change, the underlying concerns remained fairly consistent.

In chapter thirteen of the work, Baxter gives a brief account of why the parliamentary cause was justified in the light of the political theory which he has spent the previous twelve chapters developing in some detail. On the whole, this chapter focuses on the various infringements of parliamentary and popular rights in which the king had indulged in the time immediately prior to the hostilities. Distinguishing carefully between the person and position of the king, and the king’s will and actions, Baxter argues that the war was in its origin an attempt to curb the latter not to overthrow the former. Nevertheless, to the highly theoretical core of his argument Baxter adds a number of more pragmatic considerations which speak eloquently about his own wider, and perhaps not so theoretical, concerns. First, he claims that he was driven into the arms of the parliamentary forces by the pro-Royalist mob in his own parish who had left him fearing for his life as one of the despised Puritans. Thus, geographical location and personal safety were at least contributing factors in his choice.\footnote{A Holy Commonwealth, 211-12.}

Second, and undoubtedly more significant for understanding Baxter’s intellectual position, were his fears about the potential ascendancy of popery. On the international stage, two related issues appear to have preoccupied him in the early stages of the war: the recent massacring of Protestants in Ireland by Catholics; and the fact that this would appear to fit well with what he perceived to be a pro-French, pro-Catholic party which was gaining influence at court, presumably (though he does not make the connection explicit) through the King’s French wife. In an eloquent passage, Baxter describes the fear which the Irish massacre and its implications had aroused in him:

> If you say, What was all this to England? I Answer, we knew how great a progress the same party had made in England, and it was them that we were told by the Trustees of our safety, that we were in danger of, and the fire was too near us to be neglected; and our safety too much threatened, to be carelessly ventured into the heat of the peril; or to be wholly taken out of our Trustees hands, when thousands were thus suddenly butchered by the Papists in our own Dominions, and those Papists likely to have invaded England, when they had conquered Ireland, and their friends were so powerful about the Court, and through the Land. . . .\footnote{Ibid., 219.}

What is clear from this passage is Baxter’s fear that the pro-French party at Court were effectively removing from the hands of Parliament the ability to deal with the very serious threat posed by the Irish, and thus Catholic, problem.
This is very important for understanding Baxter’s later approach to church unity which cannot be understood in isolation from the wider context of international religious politics. For Baxter, the Civil War was above all a war worth fighting because it was the only means of establishing a Protestant state with the various resources necessary for resisting the infiltration of French-Catholic influence into England. This, I believe, is what provides the continuity between Baxter’s early political thought and that of his later years: he may change his mind concerning the nature and competence of political structures, but he never changes his mind about the need to ward off the Catholic threat to English society.

Baxter’s attitude to the Catholic threat makes it quite clear that it would be a grave error to interpret him as in any way a precursor of modern notions of tolerance or liberty of conscience. In order to underline the fundamentally anti-Catholic purpose of the Civil War, Baxter reminds the reader of *A Holy Commonwealth* that it was not a war fought for freedom of any religion but rather freedom for the true, i.e. Protestant, religion which was, in good Presbyterian style, to be maintained by the power of the civil magistrate:

Nor was it [the purpose of the war] the altering of Laws, which is not to be done by force, but freely by the Law-givers. And therefore it was not to procure a cessation of the Magistrates Power in Religion, for encouraging well-doers, and restraining intollerable Deceivers, which some call Liberty of Conscience... [It was] former connivance at Popery that they [Parliament] were offended at, and not a Liberty for Popery that they fought for; and that Heresie and Popery were Covenanted against by them, is well known; though the Liberty of Truth and Godliness they defended.\(^{11}\)

For Baxter, then, the Civil War was, on one level, very much a war of religion where Protestant was pitted against Catholic, not a war for freedom, in any modern sense, against the forces of oppression. This basic rejection of Catholicism, and the need to formulate a coherent Protestant policy against it, was something which was to stay with Baxter until the day he died and provided one motive—and one important boundary-marker—for his quest for Christian unity: the unity sought must provide a strong Protestant consensus against Catholicism and thus, by implication, protect England against the French.

That Baxter continued to reject the notion of liberty of conscience as a basis for social and religious stability is demonstrated by his attitude to the Cromwellian settlement. In the passage quoted above from 1659, it is clear that he is unconvinced by the various attempts that had been made during the Commonwealth to establish liberty of conscience and to interpret the Parliamentary cause along these lines. Indeed, in his massive autobiographical work, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, written, of course, after the repudiation of his

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 225.
more positive assessment of the War and Commonwealth, Baxter paints a picture of Cromwell as a man whose religious policy of tolerance for the sects is driven solely by the pragmatic requirements of his own insatiable ambition. Baxter dates this from the remodelling of the army in 1645, which he interprets as a selling-out of the parliamentary cause to the radicals and sectarians with the connivance of Oliver Cromwell. Much recent research has called into question the picture, painted most influentially by Marxist historian, Christopher Hill, of the New Model Army as a hot-bed of social and theological radicalism and has highlighted the orthodoxy of many of its leading religious lights. This, however, is somewhat irrelevant to the case of Baxter: it does not matter if the army was indeed more orthodox than Hill has claimed; the fact is that Baxter clearly perceived it as a focal point of subversive radicalism and this coloured his own later interpretation of the War, the Army, Cromwell, and the Protectorate.

Work on the religious policy of Oliver Cromwell has not been extensive, and the source material for the Lord Protector's own religious views is thin and somewhat ambiguous. Nevertheless, in two carefully argued articles, Blair Worden has made a reasoned case for understanding the intention, if not the outcome, of Cromwellian religious policy as being that of establishing a religious settlement built upon a basic Trinitarian confession upon which Protestants could agree and around which they could exercise a significant degree of freedom of conscience in regard to other doctrinal matters. Such a settlement, while obviously excluding the Catholics and

12 Baxter's attitude to Cromwell is summed up by his interpretation of his military policy: "The two designs of Cromwell to make himself great, were, 1. To Cry up Liberty of Conscience, and be very tender of Men differing in Judgment, by which he drew all the Separatists and Anabaptists to him, with many soberer men. 2. To set these self-esteeming Men on work to arrogate the Glory of all Successes to themselves. . . . The truth is, they did much, and they boasted of more than they did." Reliquiae Baxterianae: or, Mr Richard Baxter's Narrative of The most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times, edited by M. Sylvester (London, 1696), I, 48.

13 "These things [the apparent success of those armies dominated by religious men] set together caused almost all the Religious sort of men in Parliament, Armies, Garrisons and Country to be for the new modelling of the Army, and putting out the looser sort of Men (especially Officers) and putting Religious Men in their steads. But in all this Work the Vanists in the House and Cromwell in the Army, joined together, outwitted and over-reacht the rest, and carried on the Interest of the Sectaries in special, while they drew the Religious Party along as for the Interest of Godliness in the general." Reliquiae, I, 47.


15 Baxter himself estimated that the number of sectarians in the Army was very small, though their influence with the leaders gave them power beyond their numbers: Reliquiae, I, 53.

16 The best biography of Cromwell which takes serious account of his personal religious beliefs is that by R. S. Paul, The Lord Protector: Religion and Politics in the Life of Oliver Cromwell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

the Socinians, would provide sufficient breadth to produce an overall Protestant consensus—and it was consensus and union which Cromwell was seeking, not some early realisation of tolerance: disagreement on secondary matters would be allowed, but heresy would not be tolerated.18

What is interesting about the picture of Cromwellian religious policy and ambitions portrayed by Blair Worden is their superficial similarity to those proposed by Baxter as the basis for establishing Christian unity. Baxter himself argued that a basic subscription to the supreme authority of Scripture, combined with the Apostles' Creed as a subordinate standard, was all that could reasonably be expected from believers as a basis for church unity. This was the policy he pursued during the Protectorate in the so-called Worcestershire Association which comprised members who varied on issues of church government yet who found unity on essential doctrinal matters.19 It also lay behind Baxter's attempts after the Restoration to produce a non-conformist consensus, an attempt which failed in part because of the view of John Owen that the terms of subscription, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Decalogue, were not sufficient to exclude Socinians and Papists.20 Thus, like that of Cromwell, the content of the Baxterian proposal stressed the bare minimum of doctrinal agreement as the basis for Protestant consensus. What is surprising, therefore, is the distaste Baxter had for the Cromwellian settlement. Indeed, it was the Cromwellian notion of liberty of conscience which Baxter had singled out, so he claims, as the distinguishing ideological mark of the sectarians in the army, before any issues such as baptism, church government, or the antinomian question.21 For him, its weakness lay in the fact that it allowed the sects to proliferate, a proliferation which threatened to undermine the very fabric of society.22 In addition, it ran counter to the intentions of the Solemn League and Covenant to protect the king against "schism, as well as against Popery and Prophaneness."23 This attitude is what motivated him to warn Parliament in 1654 that "Thousands might curse you for ever in Hell if you grant such a liberty to all men to deceive them and entice them thither."24 While Baxter did concede that Cromwellian policy had allowed freedom for true


19 See Nuttall, Richard Baxter, 64-84.
20 Calendar, nos. 769, 771.
21 Reliquiae I.i, 53.
22 Baxter develops this argument in a discussion of the five principle sects (Vanists, Seekers, Ranters, Quakers, and Behmenists) in Reliquiae I.i, 74-79, where he lists their errors, their prominent leaders, and their antisocial behaviour. All five are, he claims, a varied assortment of "infidels and papists," and the Quakers in particular are singled out for the "popish plot" treatment, since they have been thoroughly infiltrated by the Franciscans (77).
23 Reliquiae I.i, 52.
24 Humble Advice: or the Heads of those Things which were offered to many Members of Parliament by Mr Richard Baxter (London, 1655), 2, quoted in Worden, "Toleration," 210, n. 13.
gospel preachers as well as the sects, his attitude remained that of basic disapproval. This attitude was to persist, and was only confirmed by his view that any moves towards toleration in the years of the restored monarchy were always driven by a desire to give Roman Catholics the upper hand and eclipse the true gospel yet further. If the Protestant consensus envisaged by Baxter was to provide a bulwark against the international Catholic threat, this itself depended upon the suppression of sectarianism. The church depended upon the maintenance of the proper hierarchical order of things to achieve this, and the democratic leanings of the sects posed a threat to such stability: this is why Baxter claimed always to say at least one thing in every sermon that nobody in the congregation understood in order that ordinary church members did not consider themselves equal, or even superior, to their minister and overthrow the proper system of church government.

In the light of this, and in the context of the need to ward off the political threat of France and the Catholics, we must be wary of taking some of Baxter’s apparently tolerant rhetoric at face value. Nuttall, at the close of his biography of Baxter, tries to claim Baxter as a precursor of tolerant non-conformity who made the basis of Christian subscription wide enough to include Roman Catholics and Socinians. In evidence, he quotes the following statement from Baxter’s autobiography in response to those who criticised his proposal of Apostles’ Creed, Lord’s Prayer and Decalogue as containing all essentials: “A Socinian or a Papist will Subscribe all this [they said.] I answered them, So much the better.” On the following page, Nuttall then speaks of Baxter’s “desire for terms of communion wide enough to admit a Socinian.” The final section of the first quotation, however, sheds a somewhat different light on the whole statement:

But if you are afraid of communion with Papists and Socinians, it must not be avoided by making a new Rule or Test of Faith which they will not Subscribe to, or by forcing others to Subscribe to more than they can do, but by calling them to account whenever in Preaching or in Writing they contradict or abuse the Truth to which they Subscribe. This is the Work of Government.

Given in full, the quotation is in no way a plea for some kind of embryonic religious tolerance—what Baxter wants to avoid is a doctrinal formula

25 Reliquiae I.i, 86.
26 Reliquiae 3, 99-100.
27 Reliquiae I.i, 93. Clearly Baxter’s attitude to social hierarchy and its relation to his attitude to sectarians on the one hand and Roman Catholics on the other is an important aspect of his thinking on church unity and begs all of the traditional questions about the relationship between materialism and ideology. There is not space to deal with the issue in this paper, although it is clear that any full study of Baxter on this topic must take into account the findings of materialist analyses such as those of Christopher Hill.
29 Ibid., 123 (my italics).
30 Reliquiae I.ii, 139.
which is so precise that it not only keeps out heretics but unnecessarily excludes some orthodox Protestants. Heretics may subscribe to the doctrinal basis, but as soon as they show their true colours, then the civil magistrate, in good, intolerant Presbyterian fashion, will deal with them. This passage is thus not a plea for the toleration of Roman Catholicism but is of a piece with Baxter’s desire to forge a Protestant consensus against the Catholic and radical threats to English society. It is this desire for such a consensus, and not the development of an ecclesiastical program marked by tolerance, as some of Baxter’s admirers have claimed, which drives Baxter’s vision of church unity. Such a consensus required a theology which both excluded Catholics and defused the dangerous differences between Protestants.

II. Theological Foundations

We can see, then, that two basic concerns preoccupied Baxter, concerns which would inevitably co-ordinate with his theological writings: the first was the need to form a Protestant consensus capable of excluding any pro-Catholic or pro-French policy; the second was the need to avoid a settlement which allowed the sects to continue fragmenting society and placing souls in danger of hellfire. The need, therefore, was for Baxter to articulate a theology, or a theological method, which allowed him to meet the requirements these two concerns imposed upon him.

The obvious model for a Reformed, Puritan divine such as Baxter was that provided by the Reformed Orthodox. The most obvious example of this in England was that provided by John Owen. Owen’s theology stands well within the broad contours of continental Reformed Orthodoxy and would have provided a first-class way of keeping the Catholic threat at bay, being as intolerant of any hints of papal sympathies as of any other perceived error. Nevertheless, Owen’s theology was self-consciously developed in part in sharp opposition to Arminianism, and, indeed, to any who deviated to any degree from strict Reformed Orthodoxy. As such, it scarcely provided the opportunity for building a broad Protestant consensus, immediately excluding as it did the numbers of Protestants who did not subscribe to Owen’s brand of theology and offering no basis, other than that provided by the total surrender of any opposition, for forging an alliance with those of another, albeit Protestant, persuasion. Indeed, as we shall see below, Baxter regarded the zeal for doctrinal precision evident in men such as Owen as functionally the same as the theology of the radical sectarians—it served primarily to fragment society and thus opened the door to the very social chaos which Baxter’s ecumenical agenda sought to close forever. For this reason, the combination of Reformed Orthodoxy and a vigorously

31 On Owen’s theology, see Trueman, The Claims of Truth.
Presbyterian view of church and state was no answer either, relying ultimately upon brute coercion for maintaining social unity since its theological basis was far too strict and narrow to generate genuine religious, political and social stability.

Thus, it is against this background, on the one hand the pressing political and social need for church unity, on the other the inadequacy of available models of unity, that Baxter's great systematic arguments for an "ecumenical" theology, *A Catholick Theologie* and the *Methodus Theologiae*, must be understood.\(^{32}\)

To anyone who has plowed their way through it, the full title of Baxter's major work of 1675 can only have an ironic ring: *Richard Baxter's Catholick Theologie: Pure, Plain, and Peaceable for Pacification of the Dogmatical Word-Warriors*. It is quite possible that Baxter wrote and published more words in the English language than anyone before or since, and this work is amongst the most dogmatical and excessively verbose pieces he ever penned. Nevertheless, as a source for understanding Baxter's mind, it has no equals in his immense body of work.

The premise of the work is really quite simple: the church formulated the Apostles' Creed before any canonical book was written and this provided both the basic confession upon which early Christians united and the grid through which the scriptures were to be interpreted. Any attempt to go beyond this and to create a more detailed basis for agreement represented a fundamental deviation from primitive Christianity and thus a decline from the ideal of the early church. This much of the argument is laid out in a brief preliminary letter to the reader.\(^{33}\) The rest of the work is then devoted to an analysis first, of the origins of doctrinal controversies, and second, of their resolution. It is Baxter's analysis of the first which directly leads to the answers he proposes in the second.

Following his passion for tripartite division of everything into power, wisdom, and goodness or love, a distinction he adopted from Tommaso Campanella, he sees the origins of the fragmentation of the church lying in three areas: the abuse of power; the abuse of wisdom; and the abuse of goodness or love.\(^{34}\)

On the first point, the abuse of power, Baxter recites the usual litany of criticisms of the Roman Church, stressing its greed and its acquisition of civil power as the bases for creating a church driven by secular interests and not by a desire to see the gospel taught and believed. The result is a church which outlaws those who speak the truth and thus forces out true believers in order to keep hold of its power and its revenues.\(^{35}\)


\(^{33}\) See *Catholick Theologie*, i-v (no numbering in original).

\(^{34}\) See ibid., (Preface) vi (no numbering in original). On the influence of Campanella on Baxter, see Trueman, "A Small Step Towards Rationalism."

\(^{35}\) See *Catholick Theologie* (Preface), vii-x.
The second and third points, abuse of wisdom and abuse of love, are closely related—the latter leading to the over-zealous application of the former. It is, therefore, upon the first of these two—the abuse of wisdom—that I wish to concentrate.

According to Baxter, there are two kinds of abusers of wisdom in the church. The first are the straight Romanists whose basic error lies in their multiplication of the numbers of dogmas to which true believers must subscribe. The net result is that the majority of believers have in fact been cut out of the church, while the institutional church itself has "slipped into the grossest errors almost that humane nature is capable of (even to making it necessary to salvation, to deny our own and all the sound mens senses in the World in the case of Transubstantiation)." 36

What is particularly interesting at this specific point in Baxter's argument is that he cites the patristic debates "about Persona and Hypostasis" as being early examples of precisely this kind of unhelpful and hair-splitting theology which lay at the root of much of the church's troubles, a point to which we shall return.37

The second source of abuse of wisdom in the churches is the Schoolmen. Baxter himself, as he confesses in the Preface and in his autobiography, was at one time hypnotized by the subtlety and power of the arguments of the scholastics but later came to reject their theology. Indeed, in a passionate passage, he declares that it is not just Roman schoolmen who have generated the problem:

The case of the Schoolmen, and such other Disputing Militant Theologues, who have spun out the doctrine of Christianity into so many Spiders Webs and filled the World with so many Volumes of Controversies, as are so many Engines of contention, hatred and division: And I would our Protestant Churches, Lutherans and Calvinists, had not too great a number of such men, as are far short of the Schoolmens subtilty, but much exceed them in the enviousness of their zeal, and the bitterness and revilings of their disputes, more openly serving the Prince of hatred against the Cause of Love and Peace.38

Baxter is, of course, playing on the typically ambiguous Protestant understanding of Schoolmen in this passage—he himself is quite happy to utilize scholastic method when it suits his purpose, as is clear from his massive Methodus Theologiae. What he is objecting to is the scholastics' alleged obsession with logic-chopping and overly-pedantic arguments and distinctions.

Baxter follows this description of scholasticism with an account of why it should have such an enduring appeal within the church. Clearly speaking from experience, he stresses the carnal satisfaction to be achieved from an appearance of learning and the ease with which knowledge, as seated in the

36 See ibid. (Preface), xi.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
appearance of learning and the ease with which knowledge, as seated in the human intellect, is in fact a much more subtle and easier way for Satan to achieve his goal of shipwrecking individuals and the church—by overfeeding the intellect, the Devil distracts men and women from issues relating to the will, such as morality and holiness, and creates a religion of mere formalism. In addition, Baxter also blames the influence of teachers: “And it is not the most that have the happiness of very wise, experienced, and thoroughly Learned Teachers; but most are instructed by half-witted men.” 39

It is quite clear from this that Baxter sees this kind of scholasticism as one of the major reasons for the breakdown of church unity—while the Roman church may be ruthlessly ambitious in terms of its worldly power, and may have overburdened its people with dogmas and overly subtle theology, the Protestant church too has fallen prey to at least the last of these, and this is a major factor in the crisis in Protestantism which Baxter perceives as he looks around. This is why, as I said earlier, the Owens and Rutherfords of the seventeenth-century world are, in fact as dangerous to church unity as the radical sectarians: their over-precise theology is as damaging as the wild and unsophisticated creeds of the Quakers, the Ranters, and the Family of Love.

Whatever the reasons for the appeal of scholasticism (in this sense of the word), the significant point about its damaging effect on church unity is not the motivations that lie behind it but the way in which it leads theology away from the truth. This is summed up by Baxter in an extremely important passage in the Preface:

Learning is of many ages got into certain forms of words; and he that hath got some organical arbitrary Notions, passeth for a Learned man; or he that can speak many Languages: while true real wisdom (which consisteth 1. In knowing the Greatest Things, and 2. In fitting words to things) is much neglected. . . . All words (being arbitrary signs) are Ambiguous; And few Disputers have the jealousie and skill which is necessary to discuss equivocations, and to agree of the meaning of all their terms before they use them in disputing: And so taking Verbal differences for Material, doth keep up most of the wretched Academical and Theological Wars of the World. 40

Baxter here argues that words are only meaningful when they refer to something real. The form of the word is entirely arbitrary; it is the thing to which the word refers which gives it its meaning. True wisdom, therefore, consists in knowing these real things and being able to fit words to them; problems arise when words take on a life of their own, and are assumed to refer to something real when, in fact, they refer to nothing at all.

What this argument does is to thrust to the forefront of the theological enterprise the need for linguistic analysis. Now, while such analysis does not

39 Ibid. (Preface), xii.
40 Ibid. (Preface), xiii.
form part of the formal prolegomena in either of Baxter’s great statements of theology, the *Catholick Theologie* and the *Methodus Theologiae*, in both works there are prefaces which state the importance of this issue for all future theological procedure. Indeed, in the *Methodus*, Baxter makes it clear that theological method is, in effect, to follow the pattern of theological reality and it does this when the words and sentences it uses are themselves patterned after the nature and order of that reality.41

Given Baxter’s statement that words are arbitrary signs, the key question becomes, of course, how the meaning of these arbitrary signs is fixed. What are the things, the res, which provide the words with their meaning? It is here that Baxter points once again towards the minimal doctrinal core which he believes Christian theology can competently articulate and upon which sound, biblical Christian unity can be built: there is one church; this church has the one Holy Spirit as its soul; it has one hope of heaven; it has one Lord and Savior; it has one basic symbol, that of the Apostles’ Creed; and it has one baptismal covenant; and one God and Father of all.42 The immediate realities to which these things refer are the basic stuff of theology, the essential content of the Bible, and theology, in its structure and its choice and use of words, is to aim to reflect this fact as closely as possible.

This then gives Baxter a rationale for understanding where the strictly orthodox err and pose a threat to church unity. The manifestation of their error lies in them multiplying the number of dogmas which need to be believed, or narrowing the definitions of dogmas to an absurd degree which illegitimately excludes others. This position is in fact the end-result of two basic methodological errors: one is the failure to establish before hand the meanings of the words being used in any given disputation or controversy; the second is the failure to realize that some words actually have no real reference point and are thus meaningless. Both points are brought out by Baxter in a passage of typical passion:

41 “Syllabarum partes sunt literae, verborum syllabae, sententiarum verba, orationis sententiae, cuius ordo et debita compaginatio Methodus est ordo aut rerum aut verborum et sententiarum est; Hic autem et rebus et menti dicentis, et audientium seu legentium mentibus adaptandus est. Quoniam autem conceptus et verba sunt rebus conformanda, vera methodi ratio in conformitate hac consistit. Et qui rerum ordinem et harmoniam nescit, is scientiae neque laudem meretur, neque nomen. Qualis ille physicus est, qualis astronomus, qualis geographus, qualis arithmeticus, qualis musicus etc. qui rerum ordinem nescit, non opus est ut pluribus aperirem. Non est regnum, non civitas, non ecclesia, non schola, non domus absque ordine. Qualis erit concio, qualis oratio aut alius cultus divinus absque ordine? Et quis eum mentis compotem existimaverit, qui verba incoherentia tantum nullo ordine loquitur.... Conceptuum autem et verborum veritas consistit, in eorum conformitate ut prius dictum est.... Methodus et intellectionis et memoriae magnum adiumentum est. A radicibus seu fundamentalibus incipiendo, consequentium et minimorum facilitatem sit investigatio. Et vix sperandum est eum bene procedere qui male incepit: Ex uno falso plurima sequuntur. Et notatu dignum est. Relationes plurumque in ordine fundatas esse, et in scientiis pluribus partes tantas tenere relationes, ut earum inscit paucam modum possunt recte explicare.”

Methodus Theologiae: Praefatio, i (no page numbering in original).

42 See Catholick Theologie (Preface), xviii.
And those few that at great cost and labour come to the bottom of the differences
do perceive, that the Proud Opinionators have striven partly about unrevealed
or unnecessary things, but chiefly about meer ambiguous words and arbitrary
humane notions; and multitudes condemn and revile each other, while they mean
the same things, and do not know it.  

This, then, is the problem: the Orthodox do not preface their theological
thinking with a careful analysis of the language they are using. Were they
to do so, many of the disputes in which they were engaged would simply
disappear.

Elsewhere in his work, Baxter applies this principle to the issue of church
history. We noted earlier that he mentioned the words hypostasis and persona
as the kind of meaningless words which generate needless controversy. In
his (inevitably) long and laborious work on church history, Church History of
the Government of Bishops and Their Councils Abbreviated (London, 1680), Baxter
is very critical of the developments which took place within the early church
which displaced the original simplicity of the Apostles’ Creed and put in
its place a plethora of creeds and confessions which served only to generate
factions and undermine unity. Such was the net result, he argues, of the
Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. He even goes so far as to argue that
there was no real difference between Cyril and Nestorius, and that the
whole issue turned on mere verbal, apparent differences which derived
from a failure to distinguish between Christ as God and that by which
Christ is God. Later in the treatise, he cites this simple failure to realise
that words are being used in a different way by different factions as the
source of all the christological controversies amongst the orthodox catholics
of the early church.

Now, the sources of Baxter’s thinking on this issue are impossible to
establish with any degree of accuracy. In arguing for words as arbitrary
signs, he stands within a linguistic tradition which goes back at least as far
as Plato; in arguing that the meaning of words depends upon the reality of
that which they signify, he stands within a broad tradition of logical debate.
Neither of these positions is in itself distinctive. What is distinctive, and
what is most important, is the methodological prominence which Baxter
gives to this kind of linguistic analysis in the theological task. Using this to

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43 Ibid. (Preface), xxiv. Cf. his comment earlier in the Preface, when describing his slow
dissillusionment with the Schoolmen: “I came by many years longer study to perceive, that
most of the Doctrinal Controversies among Protestants (that I say not in the Christian World)
are far more about equivocal words than matter; and it wounded my soul to perceive what
work, both Tyrannical, and unskilful Disputing Clergie-men had made these thirteen hundred
years in the world!”

44 Church History, 110.

45 “For my part, I again say, past doubt, that neither Nestorius nor Cyril were heretical de
re; but that they were of one mind, and that one spake of the concrete, and the other of the
abstract; that one spoke of Christus qui deus and the other of Christus qua Deus.” Church History, 94.

46 Church History, 182.
undergird his drastic simplification of Christian faith by emphasising the limited number of meaningful realities to which words can refer, he creates a theology which dramatically reduces the scope for theological speculation and which carries with it strong anti-metaphysical tendencies which are not dissimilar in some ways from those being exhibited in the developing English empiricist philosophical tradition as epitomised by Thomas Hobbes, with whom Baxter was familiar, and later by John Locke whose work, particularly on Christian theology, carries within itself an anti-speculative current not dissimilar to that of Baxter. This stands in stark contrast with the work of, say, an Owen or a Rutherford in the British context, or of a Francis Turretin on the continent, whose systems and theology tended to operate within the broad ontological and epistemological parameters laid down in the Middle Ages. In contrast to them, Baxter appears as one whose theological presuppositions and methodology represent something of a move towards a more critical approach to the logical and epistemological foundations of theology, something which is indicative, I believe, of a small but significant shift away from traditional ways of doing theology, a development which is also discernible in his appropriation of the Campanellan critique of Renaissance Aristotelianism as the basis for, among other things, broadening the scope of natural theology and developing a speculative doctrine of the trinity.†

A good example of the way this approach affects his thought and changes the terms of theological debate is provided by his attempt to mediate between the views of the Arminians who sought to avoid determinism by using the Molinist notion of middle knowledge and those Reformed Orthodox who rejected middle knowledge on the basis of a premotionist understanding of God’s relationship to the world. The debate focused on a wide number of issues, particularly on the notion of causality, with the premotionists arguing that God could not even hypothetically conceive of a world where his will was not, in the final analysis, the specific cause of any given specific events. There was, however, a strong logical side to the debate which addressed the issue of God’s knowledge of conditional statements, a notion upon which the Arminian position depended.

Baxter’s solution to the problem is not that of, say, his great contemporary and rival, John Owen. Owen’s argument focused on the issue of causality, 

† By adopting the Campanellan division of being into power, wisdom, and love, Baxter allows for a close analogy to be drawn between the natural world and the being of God of precisely the kind that Reformed theology typically rejected out of hand, and thus opened the way for a speculative approach to the trinity: for a detailed discussion, see Trueman, “A Small Step Towards Rationalism.”


and could have been cribbed from any Thomist textbook: every specific action required a specific cause; if that specific cause was not ultimately God, then something else stood at the head of that particular causal chain; therefore there was another first cause in addition to God; therefore there was another god. It was, thus, the issue of causality which he regarded as the weak link in the chain.\textsuperscript{50}

Baxter’s approach, however, is somewhat different. While he does argue about causality and appears to side on this issue with the Arminians in allowing God a general upholding influence which individual creatures are then able to turn to specific objects as they wish,\textsuperscript{51} his position has to be distinguished from that of the Arminians because of the vigorous logical assault he launches on the idea of God’s knowledge of future conditionals. Indeed, in his major discussion of this issue, that in the \textit{Methodus Theologiae},\textsuperscript{52} the burden of discussion falls upon the analysis of the meaning of the linguistic terms being used, culminating in his statement that, while God knows future conditional statements because human beings know them, he does not think in terms of future conditional statements and therefore the logical problems deriving from such statements should not be imputed to God.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, the whole doctrine of middle knowledge, as Baxter understands it, is built upon the linguistic mistake of assuming that the human language of future conditional statements bears a close enough resemblance to the way God thinks for its logical properties to be as problematic for God as they are for humans.

Lest, however, the reader thinks that Baxter is simply employing this linguistic analysis as a means of scoring points off the Arminians, we should note that he then immediately proceeds to turn the same weapon on the Reformed Orthodox under the guise of attacking the medieval distinction between God’s knowledge of simple understanding and his knowledge of vision.\textsuperscript{54} Having presented a concise but thorough exposition of the terms, their meanings and implications, he declares the whole lot to be very unhelpful, to represent impious speculation about the inner workings of the divine mind, and to go well beyond what he considers to be all that can safely be said about God. What can be said about God is that all good is the result of God, all evil is from the abuse of free will, our destruction is our own fault, and all our help and salvation come from God alone.\textsuperscript{55} Any discussion


\textsuperscript{51} See \textit{Catholic Theologie}, Part 3, 38.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Methodus Theologiae} 1.2.1-27, 72-78. This is in essence a slight expansion of his argument in \textit{Catholic Theologic}, 42-44.

\textsuperscript{53} “\textit{De Scientia autem Conditionali tenendum est, at jam dictum est, 1. Deam non scire per propositiones, neque multarum cogitationum seriem et lusum Intellectus Divino (sicat humano) adscribendas esse. Non igitur talis propositio ut in Mente Divina fingenda est [si hoc aut illud prius facero inde aliud illud sequetur.]}” \textit{Methodus Theologicae} 1.2.23, 77.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 1.2.24.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 1.2.26.
of God's will must take these as the basic points of reference and concentrate simply on explication, not speculation.

It is not within the scope of this paper to judge whether Baxter's critiques of the Arminian and Orthodox positions are at all coherent, or whether his own proposed alternative is in any way adequate. Certainly, anyone who has ever read through the *Catholick Theologie* or the *Methodus Theologiae* will be left with many doubts about whether Baxter's own theology lives up to the non-speculative criteria which he sets for others. What we must be clear about, however, is the nature of the theology which Baxter is, at least in theory, proposing. It is emphatically not a synthesis which seeks to take what is good or compatible from both sides, Arminian and Reformed, in order to come up with some kind of "third way" through the middle. Rather, what he is presenting is a critical approach to theology which undercuts the established debate by arguing, on the basis of his view of language, that the whole argument as currently pursued is wrong-headed, based upon a series of meaningless concepts and distinctions. The result, then, is not a synthetic compound of Arminian and Reformed ideas but a theology which solves the disagreement by denying the legitimacy of theological speculation and debate in those areas where the two sides disagree. It is not therefore some kind of tolerant inclusivism which proposes a basic doctrinal confession as the ground for theological unity; it is instead a rather intolerant theological exclusivism which rejects as impious and arrogant any attempt to move beyond this confession.

**III. Baxter on Church Unity: Some Preliminary Conclusions**

When taken together, the motives behind Baxter's quest for church unity—the need to provide for an orthodox Protestant consensus against both the Roman Catholics (and thus the French) and the sects who threatened to tear society asunder—and the method proposed to achieve this—a basic confession founded on careful linguistic analysis—appear as two halves of the same coin. Baxter was far from offering a model of church unity which placed the basic confession at the center of a theological consensus around which a variety of theological opinions could be tolerated—this was the essence of the Cromwellian policy of which Baxter himself was so suspicious precisely because it allowed the sects to peddle their distinctives with impunity. Instead, he aimed at nothing less than making this basic confession the boundary of theological speculation, something which would provide the theological basis of the consensus he desired and which he achieved through his emphasis upon the priority and importance of linguistic analysis in the theological task. As he makes clear in the famous passage quoted in part above, where he accepts that his creedal proposals are those to which Roman Catholics and Socinians might subscribe, they might agree to the words, the *verba*, but they did not subscribe to the things signified, the *res*, and, when their actions made this clear, the magistrate would deal with
them. Baxter’s point was that one should not make creedal subscription so precise as to exclude orthodox Protestants, not that one should welcome papists and sectarians.

Moving on from this, it is clear that the priority Baxter gives to linguistic analysis serves to transform the terms of theological debate, as is clear from the example of his discussion of middle knowledge. This change is important. With the current revision of the relationship between Reformed Orthodoxy and the Middle Ages and the Reformation which is being developed in the work of scholars such as Richard Müller and Willem Van Asselt, there is a clear need to look again at the related question of the relationship between Reformed Orthodoxy and the Enlightenment. In this context, English Puritanism is at something of a disadvantage compared to its continental counterparts, as the Puritans were ejected from the universities in the 1660s, some years before Enlightenment thinking made significant impact upon English institutions. Nevertheless, it has been suggested in numerous places that Baxter, with his constant appeals to human reason, represents something of a transitional figure between the old-style Reformed Orthodoxy and the theology of the age of the Enlightenment, and as such he surely possesses singular importance. These suggestions have on the whole been rather impressionistic and have not been worked out in any detail. My own findings here and elsewhere, however, would seem to confirm this picture of Baxter —his use of Renaissance anti-Aristotelian metaphysics and the critical placement of such vigorous linguistic analysis at the head of his theological system both represent decisive breaks with the past and serve to give his theology a profound ambiguity—it is an attempt to defend what Baxter regards as the Reformed tradition epitomized by Dordt using presuppositions and methods which are perhaps more suited to the ultimate overthrow of that same tradition. Such is certainly the case with his arguments regarding the theology of church unity: the minimal doctrinal confession for which he argues would ultimately prove more practicable in a world where liberty of conscience and even tolerance were to become the hallmarks of religious policy. Obviously, more work is required in this area—for example, the parallels between Baxter and Hobbes on religious language are at the very least suggestive, and there is a pressing need to see how Baxter fits into the larger picture of English thought in the seventeenth

56 See Reliquiae I.ii, 198.
57 See Muller, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics; W. J. Van Asselt, Johannes Cocceius: Portret van een theoloog op oude en nieuwe wegen (Heerenveen: J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1997).
59 See, for example, Hobbes’ claim that absurdities arise from a failure between disputants to agree on the meaning of terms beforehand, and from the failure to see that certain words signify nothing and are thus meaningless: Leviathan, 1.5.8-15.
century before firm conclusions can be made—but there would seem to be enough evidence already to suggest that Reformed Orthodoxy in England did not pave the way for the Enlightenment through vigorous application of traditional scholastic method and Aristotelianism but, on the contrary, made way for a more “reasonable” Christianity through its very abandonment of these things, as we see, for example, in Baxter’s appropriation of Campanella and the priority he gives to his critical linguistic analysis and the implications these have for theological speculation.  

Finally, it is clear that the use of Baxter’s writings after his death was, in many ways, antithetical to their intended purpose in his lifetime. Nowhere is this clearer than in his writings on church unity. The fact that his writings could be used by Unitarians in the eighteenth century to add weight to their refusal to subscribe to a creedal statement of trinitarian doctrine perhaps tells us less about Baxter’s own thought than it does about the way he was read by others. We have noted the ambiguity of his thought—the fact that it was in effect an attempt to defend what he regarded as traditional teaching in a rather modern fashion—and this ambiguity was lost once his writings were divorced from their immediate historical context, a divorce both symbolised and in part effected by the republication only of his practical works. The ecumenical rhetoric of the man, without the background of French Catholicism and the Presbyterian fear of radical sectarianism, could now be read as an early plea for religious tolerance or the liberty of conscience which he so much despised, in just the same way as the warm piety of the pastoral works, without the counterweight of the Methodus Theologiae, could be read as foreshadowing eighteenth century pietism and not as the practical outworking of a highly sophisticated dogmatic system. In being the victim of such misreading, Baxter was not unique—the expulsion of the Puritans from the universities and the subsequent Anglican hegemony of higher education in England meant that Puritan works were thereafter for the most part read only by later pietists, most of whom lacked the formal theological training necessary to plumb the depths of the Puritan mind.  

Like those who later went in search of the historical Jesus, they looked down the well of history and saw nothing but dim reflections of themselves staring back upwards. The great irony in the case of Baxter is that they focused on what he said, the *verba* and missed that which the words signified, the *res*; and this, as Baxter tells us, is the root of all misunderstandings—religious, ecclesiastical and, as he would no doubt have observed, scholarly.  

It is worth noting at this point that Baxter’s innovative proposals in the areas of metaphysics and theological language do not prevent him from continuing to use the scholastic *quaestio* method for articulating his theology (e.g. in the Methodus Theologiae), pointing to the basic complexity of the relationship of form and content in seventeenth-century Reformed theology where new ideas could quite easily be framed in terms of traditional language and structures.  

See Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 5-6; John Coffey has noted that a similar fate befell Samuel Rutherford in the Scottish context: see his *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: the Mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5-11.