Joshua Rodda

Public Religious Disputation in England, 1558–1626. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2014. Pp. x + 232. \$124.95; £ 70.00.

Few early modern religious proclamations rival the Jesuit Edmund Campion's *apologia* for rhetorical flourish. Zealous and undaunted, Campion risked everything in the hope that he could recover England from heresy and damnation. To achieve this, he requested three audiences: he wished to demonstrate Catholicism's claims before the lords of the Privy Council, before the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and before lawyers, canon and civil. Through a careful explication of Scripture, fathers of the church, ecumenical councils, history, and natural reason, he would repudiate Protestant arguments and establish the Catholic Church as the authentic interpreter of Christ's teachings. If his offer was refused, he would recommend the matter to God, praying that "we may at last be friends in heaven when all injuries shall be forgotten." Campion's "Brag" made him England's most wanted man, ending in his pursuit and eventual capture. Compelled by the notoriety of the "Brag," the government granted him disputations in the Tower of London, in conditions far from ideal. Despite the controlled environment, the disputations did not unfold as the crown had hoped, and were soon transferred to a different, less accessible venue before their final cancellation. Campion himself was martyred shortly thereafter.

Campion's public disputations with divines from the Established Church were not isolated media events. Similar gauntlets were frequently thrown down, challenges accepted or rejected, and victors lauded in officially sanctioned broadsheets and pamphlets, or in furtive manuscripts clandestinely circulated. Jesuits were not the only Catholic participants, but because of their reputation and their knack for self-publicity, the disputations in which they were involved, are the best known. Some debates with Jesuit participants have been researched hitherto, among them the efforts of the Englishman John Percy (better known as "Fisher the Jesuit"), the Irishman Henry FitzSimon, and the Scot John Hay. But until the appearance of this monograph, no scholar has attempted a thorough investigation of the phenomenon, its principles (implicit or explicit), its role in Protestant and Catholic strategies, or the confessions' shared conviction in the lucid power of reason. "What we are concerned with," the author explains, "is the history of public disputation, as a practice and phenomenon that shaped religious controversy, and was ultimately broken down by it" (5). Rodda scrutinizes the disputations in a quasi-Kantian way to explicate their "conditions of possibility."

The author's research on the subject emerged from his interest in Daniel Featley, a Protestant minister, who debated English Catholic theologians in Paris in 1612. Initial confidence in the value and effectiveness of disputations was fueled by the universities' comparable practice in the awarding of a degree. In this context, disputation was an accepted method for establishing one's position and dismantling the opponent's. Ideally it produced a clarity formerly obscured by the "glass darkly." The Thomist assumption that natural reason would support God's truth propelled the arguments. University disputations evolved from the dialectics of the scholastic method, tempered by Renaissance humanism and rhetoric. The debates involved a respondent (the defender of the thesis), the opponents who argued against the thesis, and the moderator, who concluded the event. Authorities, ecclesiastical or secular, eventually restricted or controlled hitherto free discussion of dangerous (or even merely questionable) theological or philosophical topics. Although either respondent or opponent could seize control of the discussion, generally the opponent had the advantage.

All adversaries agreed that their points must be based on reason and Scripture, but disagreed on the role of history, the church fathers, and contemporary theologians. Featley, for example, dismissed Christopher Bagshaw's citation of Robert Bellarmine, with the claim that he wanted to hear the English secular priest's arguments and not the Italian Jesuit cardinal's. Regardless of the argumentation, the disputations became a public forum not to uncover Christian truth, but to promulgate the official position. Disputations demonstrated the truthfulness of the doctrines already laid down by authorities. Conviction through clarification was preferable to conformity through coercion. Catholic champions requested protection from the penal laws and at least temporary immunity so that they could emerge from the shadows to participate without fear of any reprisal. But behind the sham, "the aim of the debates was never to call truth into doubt, but to satisfy its opponents" (71). Christian truth had been legally established; disputations vindicated it.

Jacobean disputations approximate the ideal more than their Elizabethan counterparts. Fisher the Jesuit debated Francis White, dean of Carlisle, and William Laud, later archbishop of Canterbury, on three occasions in May, 1622, on the relative merits of their churches to facilitate, or to prevent, the conversion of Mary Villiers, countess of Buckingham and mother of the royal favorite George. King James I attended and participated in the second dispute. What role the disputations in fact played in the countess's religious pilgrimage cannot be easily calculated, but she did become a Roman Catholic.

Even though many questioned the abilities and arguments of the disputants, few indicted the process of disputation in Elizabethan and Jacobean

England. Enthusiasm for disputation, however, waned during the reign of Charles I as opposition to the Laudian church waxed. Government control shattered the illusion that free discussion would eventuate in the exposition of truth: "Truth was no longer the object—instead it was the weapon by which victory (encouragement to conversion) could be achieved" (202). Equally important was the loss of belief that reason could lead to faith. "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" Tertullian asked. Little, if anything, became a more frequent reply.

Rodda has done a fine job, and raised various questions for further study—or, indeed, an edition of extant texts of disputations as a handbook. The monograph because of its terse style demands careful reading, but the effort is worthwhile. This reader, however, wonders about the author's interpretation of Campion's disputations in the Tower. They were neither, according to Rodda, "show trials" nor "a perversion or exploitation of the academic format." One wonders how many Campion scholars would agree with this? Anticipating some pushback, the author delineates that they were "disputation *improved*; disputation *taken to its logical conclusion*" in that the authorities sought to ensure the victory of Protestant truth and the defeat of Catholic error (82). Later he explains that the "disputations were set up within the forms of academe, to avoid the triumph of dangerous falsehood and to persuade as far as possible" (95–96). The conferences were curtailed and cancelled once the authorities realized they were not proceeding as intended. Rodda admits that the government would not allow Campion to emerge victorious, but this reader at least fails to see how this differs from a "show trial" or "perversion."

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