THOMAS BARLOW ON THE LIABILITIES OF “NEW PHILOSOPHY”

PERCEPTIONS OF A REBELLIOUS ANCILLA IN THE ERA OF PROTESTANT ORTHODOXY

Richard A. Muller

1. Introduction

The intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth century have been chronicled in numerous monographs and histories, and, most recently, with significant attention paid to less-famous figures. Still, inasmuch as this scholarship has belonged typically to the history of philosophy and the history of the philosophy of science, there remain major gaps in the study of the era, resulting at least in part from the lack of dialogue between these disciplines and the history of theology. Seventeenth-century proponents of the older Christian Aristotelianism, whether philosophers or theologians, who looked on the various forms of late Renaissance and early modern rationalism as distinctly problematic have been neglected—either barely mentioned or dismissed as less than cognizant of the demands of modernity, whether scientific or cultural. Yet, as examination of the writings of these proponents of the older pat-


terns of thought often reveals, many of their objections had merit and many of their fears concerning the eventual effects of the new philosophies were quite justified. Indeed, it is arguable that the predicted dangers of the new philosophies have been fulfilled a hundred-fold in the loss of comprehension of traditional terms, arguments, and categories that characterizes much of what has passed for theology in the twentieth and now passes for it in the twenty-first century. The present essay looks at the problem of the new philosophies and related issues in the new science from the perspective of one well-placed theologian and churchman of the era, with specific attention to the perceived dangers posed by a particular form of seventeenth-century rationalism for the cogency of traditional theological discourse.

2. Thomas Barlow and the Problem of the New Philosophy

Thomas Barlow (1607–1691), noted as a theologian and philosopher in his own day, offers not only a positive statement of the traditionary philosophical foundation of the older Protestant orthodoxy, but also a significant window on the debates of the era and, specifically, on the perceived dangers of the new philosophies. Born at Barlow Moor, near Manchester, Barlow matriculated at Queen’s College, Oxford, receiving his B.A. in 1630 and his M.A. in 1633. At Oxford, Barlow became lecturer in metaphysics and had among his pupils John Owen. He was appointed librarian of the Bodleian in 1642. He consistently opposed Arminianism at Oxford, was recognized as a significant Reformed (albeit certainly not Puritan) philosopher and theologian, and was able to retain his position in the purge of 1648. In 1660, he was made Lady Margaret Professor of divinity. He also conformed on the restoration of the monarchy and was made Bishop of Lincoln in 1675. His works include *Exercitationes aliquot metaphysicale*; Popery: or, The princi-

---
