CHAPTER ONE

LIFE OF HOOKER

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Richard Hooker was an Elizabethan polemicist who is remembered today as the author of his magnum opus, Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie: Eyght Bookes (published between 1593 and 1662). This monumental treatise was primarily written to defend the Elizabethan church against the attacks of the Elizabethan Presbyterians at the end of the 16th century. Careful secondary attention, however, was also given to the refutation of what he and his conformist contemporaries perceived to be the ‘errors’ of the Church of Rome. In his writings Hooker decisively shaped this via media between the Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholicism that has been so distinctive of what in later centuries became known as ‘Anglicanism’. Hooker’s philosophical and theological writings set forth in elegant English prose the ethical, political and religious presuppositions of his age. Theologians, past and present, correlate his practical principle—‘all things in measure, number and weight’—with his dynamic balancing of the respective authority of Scripture, reason and tradition. The ‘middle way’ describes not only Hooker’s distinctive way of thinking but also his character, including his life style and his approach to making moral and political decisions in the world. This middle way of thinking and being in the world probably ‘cost him’ in terms of his personal preferment in that Church of England which he was both defending and helping to bring into existence. Almost without fail, where radically divergent interpretations of his life and thought occur, the most proper approach is to follow the more Catholic principle of ‘both…and’ rather than the more protestant principle of ‘either…and’.

When the question has been raised by interpreters whether Hooker is a systematic, philosophical theologian or an engaged polemicist the answer is that he must be ‘both…and’.

Even ‘The Fyrst Booke Concerning Lawes, and their severall kinds in generall,’ although couched in non-controversial language, lays the foundation for all the anti-disciplinarian arguments of the later books. Book I is thus a general introduction to a work that is first a practical polemic written
to defend the constitution and practices of the Church of England as established by the Elizabethan settlement against the attack of critics who desired further reform and, secondly, a definitive expression of the balanced reformed-catholic theology that was being formulated in England during the sixteenth century by such figures and Thomas Cranmer and John Jewel. While Book I functions as the general introduction to a sustained polemic, it also lays the foundations for a coherent philosophical theology. The peculiar strength and appeal of Book I is the manner in which it resolves—or appears to resolve—the contradictions inherent in being an apologetic yet philosophical theologian. As Gibbs wrote in his ‘Introduction to Book I’ of the Folger Library Edition of Hooker’s Works:

The fundamental problem in the interpretation of book 1 is therefore that of setting an apparently serene essay in philosophical theology within the context of the practical crisis faced by the Elizabethan church during the closing decades of the sixteenth century, for it is the distinction of Book 1, both within the Laws and as compared to the works of contemporary controversialists, that Hookers’ role as detached philosophical theologian and engaged polemicist writing on behalf of an established church appear to have seamless coalesced.1

Hooker’s statements support both a high-church and a Magisterial Reformation evangelical (Lutheran and Calvinist) point of view.2 Hooker said many different things in different ways so that past and present biographers have been able to draw upon his authority to support widely divergent points of view.3 Furthermore, since Hooker’s previous biographers tended to pick out different aspects of his thought or character which fit with their own personal perspective and needs, it is impossible to write a contemporary account of Hooker’s life and works which does not take some account of these earlier biographies.

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3 The question has been debated whether Hooker should best be viewed as a successor to the late medieval scholastics or as a Protestant, evangelical reformer. The most accurate response is that he was both. See Egil Grislis in ‘Introduction to Commentary on Tractates and Sermons’. In these documents he most significantly identified Hooker’s primary sources after Scripture as the works of John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, FLE 5:619–55.