CHAPTER SEVEN

SIN AND GRACE

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The question of how to interpret Richard Hooker’s thought about sin, grace and salvation has only recently begun to receive the attention merited by its importance in the body of his writings and its place in the structure of the argument of the Lawes. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the scholarly discussion about these matters that did take place was commonly shaped by questionable assumptions about the Reformation and about Hooker’s relationship to the magisterial reformers. Many of these are now under close critical scrutiny. So, for example, Hooker has often been read as representing a doctrinal middle way peculiar to the Church of England based on principles shared neither with the reformers nor sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism. The various ways in which Hooker insists that grace does not destroy but perfects nature were taken as evidence of a departure from the reformers’ Augustinian account of the fall and original sin, of human nature, reason and freedom, and of the priority of grace. Furthermore, this principle was understood to be more or less inconsistent with the doctrine of justification peculiar to the magisterial Reformation, with its strong distinction between justification and sanctification and its insistence that the grace of justification is received by faith alone, leaving the Christian at once a sinner and just. This made it very difficult to interpret Hooker’s oft-repeated restatements of this doctrine.

An examination of what Hooker says about sin, grace and salvation will make clear that he believes it is precisely these sorts of questions that are at issue between himself and his adversaries. His argument is that Augustine’s argument for the priority of grace in human salvation and the reformed doctrine of sin and grace and the principle that grace

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I. Sin and Grace in Hooker Scholarship: Keble to the Present

During his lifetime, Richard Hooker’s critics recognized that his teaching about sin and grace was crucial to their other disagreements with him and attacked it as inconsistent with the norms of Reformation orthodoxy. In his Supplication to the Privy Counsel, Walter Travers complained of the sermons Hooker preached as the new Master of the Temple in London in the mid-1580s that the like had not ‘ben heard in publick places, with in this land, synce Quene Maries daies’. Similarly, the anonymous author of A Christian Letter, the only critique of the five Books of the Lawes published in Hooker’s lifetime, objected especially to what he understood Hooker to teach there about sin, grace, and salvation, as inconsistent with the formularies of the reformed Church of England, especially the Thirty-Nine Articles. However, these questions were soon overshadowed. Hooker’s reputation was forged and sustained for the first two centuries following his death in controversies about polity. In the last two centuries, such questions have arisen, but usually as part of a search for a uniquely ‘Anglican’ middle way between Roman Catholicism and the magisterial Reformation. This has begun to change, with a challenge to conventional wisdom from scholars like Torrance Kirby, Nigel Atkinson and, to some extent, Egil Grislis, who have argued that Hooker embraces the principles of the sixteenth-century magisterial Reformation, the peculiarities of his synthesis notwithstanding.

Kirby and Atkinson have both argued that these recent divergent readings of Hooker on sin and grace have roots in the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement, and particularly in John Keble’s edition of Hooker’s works and Newman’s Lectures on Justification. Lee Gibbs has

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2 A Supplication made to the Privy Counsel, FLE 5:208.9–10.

3 The two appealed to different standards of reformed orthodoxy. Travers, standing with the authors of the Admonitions to Parliament of 1572, appealed to the writings and the example of continental reformers and especially to John Calvin against the Articles of the Church of England and its polity as well as against Hooker. The author of ACL appealed especially to the authority of the Articles. In answer to both, Hooker protested his orthodoxy, and argued that his adversaries had misunderstood the very principles they claimed to defend.