CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ROYAL SUPREMACY

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In Book VIII of the Lawes Hooker answers opposition to the Royal Supremacy stemming from indictments brought against it by Roman Catholics as well as English presbyterians. Both opponents of the Elizabethan church agreed on the necessity of an institutionally autonomous church led by a divinely grounded spiritual authority, and consequently both argued that ‘unto no Civill Prince or Governour there may be given such power of Ecclesiastical Dominion as by the Lawes of this Land belongeth unto the Supreme Regent thereof.’1 Hooker’s response falls into three sections; first, he addresses general issues regarding the nature of the church, the meaning of dominion, and the manner in which dominion over the church is held by the English crown (chapters 1–3). These considerations are followed by a chapter addressing theological concerns that arise from ‘the title of Headship which we give to the kings of England in relation unto the church.’2 The book as we have it concludes with consideration of particular powers and prerogatives included in royal dominion over the church (chapters 5–9).

THE ROYAL SUPREMACY AND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

In the first chapter of Book VIII Hooker lays the groundwork for what he will present as the basis of the Prince’s authorization to lead the English church—viz. the fact that such authority is ‘by the lawes of this Realme annexed unto the Crowne.’3 He begins by answering objections based on the claim

that [by assuming leadership of the church] kings, being meer lay persons,…exceed the lawfull boundes of their calling. Which thinge to

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1 Lawes VIII. title; 3:315.3–7.
2 Lawes VIII. contents; 3:315.15–16.
3 Lawes VIII.1.2; 3:317.19–21.
the ende that they may perswade, [opponents of royal supremacy] first make a necessarie separation perpetuall and personall between the Church and Commonwealth. Secondly they so tie all kinde of power Ecclesiasticall unto the Church as if it were in every degree their only right, which are by proper spirituall function termed Church-Governours and might not to Christian Princes any wise appertaine.⁴

Treatment of the second claim Hooker defers until later chapters; in the first chapter he considers the supposed necessity of a perpetual personal distinction between church and commonwealth. Certainly such a distinction is important in religiously diverse communities,⁵ but in a nation in which all are Christian it seems to Hooker nonsensical.

[T]he name of a Church importeth only a Societie of men first united into some publique forme of regiment and secondly distinguished from other Societies, by the exercise of Christian religion…. [S]eing there is not any man of the Church of England, but the same man is also a member of the Commonwealth, nor any man a member of the Commonwealth which is not also of the Church of England, therefore as in a figure triangular the base doth differ from the sides thereof, and yet one and the self same line, is both a base and also a side; a side simplicie, a base if it chance to be the bottome and underlie the rest: So albeit properties and actions of one kinde doe cause the name of a Commonwealth, qualities and functions of an other sort the name of a Church to be given unto a multitude, yet one and the self same multitude may in such sort be both and is so with us, that no person appertayning to the one can be denied to be also of the other.⁶

Hooker does not intend to abolish the distinction between church and commonwealth, but he denies the necessity of a perpetual personal separation of the membership of the two bodies. ‘For the truth is that the Church and the Commonwealth are names which import thinges really different;’ a ‘commonwealth’ is a community living under a particular political structure and a ‘church’ a community embracing the true religion. The differences, however, are accidental ‘and such accidentes as may and should alwayes lovingly dwell together in one subject.’⁷ The terms ‘schoolmaster’ and ‘physician,’ are descriptions of accidentally distinct persons, yet such that ‘there is no impediment but both may be one man.’ The names ‘commonwealth’ and ‘church,’ ‘thoughe always

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⁴ Laces VIII.1.2; 3:317.21–318.2.
⁵ Laces VIII.1.3; 3:320.14–29, VIII.1.4; 3:322.27–323.23.
⁶ Laces VIII.1.2; 3:319.6–27.
⁷ Laces VIII.1.5; 3:325.1–4.