PART THREE

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS
THE RELIGIOUS THOUGHT OF FRANCIS BACON

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Abstract

The object of this essay will be to explore the character of Bacon’s religious views within the larger context of his thought as a whole. By doing so it will examine some of the arguments put forward about the extent to which Bacon’s fundamental positions on the significance of science and the role that it could play in ‘the relief of man’s estate’ can be said to have been coloured by religious presuppositions whether Protestant (and, in particular, Calvinist) or Christian more generally. The essay will further consider Bacon’s views on the proper relationship between science and religion and, in particular, the relative importance of Scripture and natural law in the study of God’s Creation.

Ours is an age when there are increasingly shrill voices urging that modernity means secularism. The recent work done by intellectual historians such as Brooke (1991) to demonstrate that the path of the early scientific movement intersected significantly with the religious currents of the time has not penetrated far beyond the world of specialists. In the larger world the black and white certainties of nineteenth-century works like John Draper’s History of the Conflict between Science and Religion (1874) and Andrew White’s The Warfare between Science and Theology in Christendom (1896) continue to hold ample sway.

In the secularist map of the past it follows that if modernity is about shaking off the shackles of religion than one should be able to find at least intimations of such a move to a religionless Weltanschauung among the key figures of the Scientific Revolution. This would apply particularly to the far-sighted Francis Bacon who in the early seventeenth century had the remarkable percipience to outline the possibilities of scientific progress for, as he put it, ‘the relief of man’s estate’. Surely the cool-headed Lord Chancellor, politically adept and almost literally a Renaissance man (since he had imbibed much of the humanist culture of the Renaissance), did not swallow fully the religious concerns that so preoccupied his contemporaries.

Such a view of Bacon has, too, historical precedent. When the French Encyclopedists came to present their view of the classification of human knowledge – which was largely based on a marginalisation of theology