RICHARD SMYTH AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DOUAI

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What could possibly be the connection between a much-neglected sixteenth-century English theologian, and a university which once did achieve substantial distinction, but now no longer is extant?

The following contribution not only seeks to establish the link between the foundation of the university of Douai (inaugurated in 1563) and the subsequent appointment of the exiled Richard Smyth as its first professor of divinity, but also hopes to shed some light on the assertion that it was Smyth’s presence there which swayed the exiled English Catholics to chose the newly-founded university as their centre of learning abroad.2

1. Richard Smyth (ca. 1500-1563):

Richard Smyth was a Worcestershire-man who, in the early or mid-1520’s, came up to Oxford to read for his letters at Merton College. Having graduated a Bachelor of Arts in 1527, Smyth was made a fellow of his conservative Oxford College.3 On the completion of his doctoral work, celebrated solemnly in the University Church, the promising young academic was appointed Regius Praelector in Theology in summer 1536.4 Smyth’s career had only taken off, for with the appointment as Master of Whittington College in London, then still a conservative college of priests financed by one of the largest sixteenth-century international trading corporations, he had gained access to some of London’s most prestigious

1 For the two only publications devoted exclusively to Richard Smyth, v. T. H. J. Leuridan, Les Théologiens de Douai XI (1904): ‘Richard Smith’, 1-29; E. Macek, Catholic Historical Review 72 (1986): ‘Richard Smith, Tudor Cleric in Defence of Traditional Belief’, 383-402. The earlier account is a sound hagiography making good use of some local primary sources, while the later account is based entirely on secondary source material, such as the Dictionary of National Biography. Smyth signed his letters “Smythaeus” or “Smyth”, we follow him in the spelling of his surname.
2 Leuridan, (1904), 28.
4 Oxford University Archives, Registri Actae Congregationis, f. 17v, 17r.
pulpits barely a year later. Smyth was beginning to establish himself as a theologian on the national scene. However, any further career, such as for instance any possible preferment to the episcopate, was cut short by two significant factors: the professor’s increasing reputation as a theological maverick, and the spreading of the reformation in England.

Following the death of his royal patron, Henry VIII, Smyth’s prospects were beginning to look more and more bleak. The Edwardian policy of appointing foreign star-theologians to English professorial chairs had not by-passed Oxford university, and so Smyth soon found himself jobless and trying to make life as uncomfortable as possible for his successor Peter Martyr Vermigli. The Italian did not warm to his conservative English predecessor, either, and their vituperative intellectual exchanges were to continue till the end of their lives. Accused later to have inflicted a royal visitation on the university, 1549 also saw Smyth’s first flight to Leuven in order to evade the consequences of likely prosecution in England.

Following a great deal of travelling through Europe, “professing divinity [...] at Paris”, then later at St Andrews, Smyth was finally able to return to England in 1553. Not that the years abroad had been futile. Smyth published some of his most acute work while in exile. His respite in Mary’s England was brief though, since following her untimely death in

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5 The Company of Mercers, whose Warden, Sir John Gresham, maintained extensive contacts in the Low Countries; LPFD Henry VIII, XII (II), 621.
6 e.g. Gardiner writing to Cromwell, in: J. Foxe, Actes and Monumentes, London, 1843, V, 35.
8 cf. Martyr to Bucer, 1550, quoted in C. H. Smyth, Cranmer and the Reformation under Edward VI, Cambridge, 1926, 119; Macculloch (1996), 489, offers insights into Smyth’s character, which are clearly inspired by later evangelical propaganda: “[h]e was a curious combination of great talent, time-serving, deep conservative convictions [...] an easy target for evangelical gibes and clearly inspired Cranmer with contemptuous anger.”
11 R. Smyth, De coelibatu liber unus. De votis monasticis liber alter ... (confutatio quorundam articulorum de votis monasticis P. Martyris ...), Leuven, 1550; (second edition, Paris ca. 1550); Diatriba de hominis justificatione aedita Oxoniae anno 1550 mense februario adversum Petrum Martyrem Vermelium ... nunc apostaematam, Leuven, 1550; Defensio sacri episcoporum et sacerdotum Coelibatus, contra impias et indocatas Petri Martyris Vermelii nugas ... nunc vero Lutetiae Parisiorum Theologiam profitemur, Paris, 1551.