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Peter Martyr Vermigli’s Political Theology and the Elizabethan Church

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SHOULD HISTORIANS OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION take more than a passing interest in the writings of a Florentine aristocrat who spent merely five years of his career in England and who never mastered the English tongue? It is arguable that Peter Martyr Vermigli, sometime scholar at Padua, Abbot of Spoleto, Prior of the Augustinian Canons at Lucca, and Professor of Hebrew in the Schola Tigurina merits being num bered among the chief architects of the reformation of the Church of England as it came to be formed in the reign of Edward VI and reached a more settled self-understanding in statutes of the Elizabethan religious settlement of 1559. In order to make such a claim, a reappraisal of cer tain primary assumptions governing the interpretation of the English Reformation is required. Chief among them is the long and widely held assumption of the ‘exceptional’ or ‘peculiar’ character of England’s expe rience of the Reformation which, for a very long time, has constituted an axiom of English Reformation historiography. Yet this assumption obscures the well-deserved title of the great Italian reformer to a pivotal role in the formation of the protestant religious settlement under Edward VI and its consolidation under Elizabeth.
Tied to the hermeneutic of ‘English exceptionalism’ is the corollary notion of the so-called via media of Anglicanism whereby the Reformation in England is understood to be a sort of halfway house between Roman Catholicism and Reformed Protestantism, It is a long-standing common place to view the Church of England in the sixteenth century as the ‘crucible for an emerging Anglicanism’. 1One scholar recently referred to ‘recognition among some contemporaries that the English church

‘See FLE, 6/1:2.

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represented a kind of Protestant tertium quid among established European churches, whose character suggested the possibility of rapproche ment with Roman Catholic as well as fellow Protestant churches’. 2As pre-eminent defender of the Elizabethan Settlement, Richard Hooker, for example, is classically held up as a key proponent of this theological and institutional middle way; and thus his theology is represented as bearing the mark of a distinctively ‘Anglican’ approach with respect to both content and method. Other pre-eminent Edwardian and Elizabethan divines Thomas Cranmer; Matthew Parker; John Jewel, John Whitgift, et al are frequently read in a proleptic light as already at work in con structing this middle way formulated by [looker with his magisterial authority. The marks of this peculiarity of English theology are fre quently identified with the embrace of ‘neo-Thomistic’ scholasticism, hyper-rationalism, Erasmian humanism, or better still a mix of all three. According to the ‘exceptionalist’ model of English Reformation, the con struction of the Anglican middle way is ipso facto a rejection of the the doctrinal norms of the continental magisterial reformers, and therefore with ftg in the Channel, the continent is very effectively cut off
In a recent book, Diarmaid MacCulloch summarises this commonly received hermeneutic by winsomely describing the English Reformation of the sixteenth century as a ‘theological cuckoo in the nest’. This charming simile suggests that the ‘egg’ of Protestant reform is laid in a ‘Romish’ nest. The ‘egg’ of Reform is the affirmation of a cluster of key Rçformation doctrines, such as one finds, for example, in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion 1) the authority of Scripture alone (solo scrprura) is sufficient to reveal the way to salvation without the necessary addition or mediation

of ecclesiastical traditions (art. 5); justification by faith alone (so/a fide), that is the putting away of sin without any reference to the merit of good works; salvation by grace alone (so/a grotto) without reference to natural

human capacity, or voluntary obedience to the law; and by Christ alone (so/us C’hritus), that is, without the mediation of the saints. To continue with the other half of MacCulloch’s simile, the ‘nest’ adopted by the Protestant cuckoo figures the ancient structures of government and wor
ship of the Church the hierarchy of bishops, the complex medieval con
stitutions of the cathedral and collegiate foundations,

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religious reform throughout Europe. Several of these Marian exiles in Zurich were to become prominent players in the Elizabethan Settlement; among them were no fewer than six future bishops, a clutch of Privy Councillors, and some of the leading lights of humanist, classical scholar
ship in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Of twenty-three epis
copal appointments made in the period 1559 62, fourteen were returned
Marian exiles. Among Elizabeth’s newly appointed bishops six had been
Bulhnger’s guests at Zurich: John Jewel of Salisbury, Richard Cox of Ely,
John Parkhurst of Norwich. Edwin Sandys of Wbrcestei James Pilkingion
of Durham, Robert Home of Winchester in addition to these, two.9 0.1 -0.1 9.4 238.ch:

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Settlement, chief among them the Royal Supremacy, the linchpin of the 1559 constitution. In his defence of the royal headship of the church in the 1 570s against the attacks of the disciplinarian puritans Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers, John Whitgift, then Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, relied closely on the political writings of Vermigli, Bullinger and two other prominent Lwinglians - — Gwalther and Wolfgang Musculus of Berne. 15The controversy between Whitgift and promoters of the Genevan model of reform in England is in many respects a replay of the dispute an the continent between Erastus and Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva.’ 6In his duel with Cartwright in the Admonition Controversy Whirgift appealed to Vermigli among other representatives of the.S’liola Tiurina in support of his Erastian ecciesiology. Richard H ooker’s celebrated defence of the Elizabethan constitution published towards the end of the century is an elaboration of this same political theology so well articulated by Vermigli in his Commentaries on the Books of Judges, Samuel and Kings. “ It is worthy of note that while he was a stu dent and later a fellow at Corpus Christi College, Oxford in the late 1 560s and early I 57th, Hooker’s patron was John Jewel, Vermigli’s disciple and secretar’s who had earlier followed his master into exile at Zurich; Hooker’s later patron while writing OJ the Lowe’s of Ecclesiastical! Politie was another distinguished Erastian. John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury during the latter half of Elizabeth’s reign (l583—1604). With Vermigli posi tioned close to its hub, this network of intellectual influence lies behind a continuous and coherent tradition of political theology in England through much of the latter half of the sixteenth century, a tradition which finds its key inspiration across the Channel, principally in Zurich. Professor Robert Kingdon has provided us with an excellent prole gonlenon to the study of Peter Martyr Vermigli’s political thought in his introduction to a selection of sc/to/ia drawn from his biblical commen taries.’ Kingdon makes a strong case on se’seral grounds to justify further critical study of Vermigli’s political writings. First, the proportion of his a’uvre devoted to political concerns is substantial. Consequently, if one is

(1 nlv of John II 1ntii/t, Dif,4 h/nshoj, 1 (antcrhurt. ed. John A re for the Parker Society, sois Cambndge: Cambridge Cniversit Press, 1651), iii, pp. 295 325.
Ruth WeseCRoth, Thomas Erastus: em Beitrag,,ur 6etchiehte der reformierten Kirehe und cur I.eh,s ma dLr Staatssouverani at (Lahr and Btden M. Schauenburg, 1954).
See Joan I ockv,ood O’Donovan. Iiieologi of Law and Authority at the English Re/rinalion Atlanta. GA: Scholars Press. 1991). pp. 151 3. See also W J. Torrance Kirby. Richard Hookerc Doctrate of [he Rotal Suprcinaci’ (Leiden and Ness ‘sork: E. J. Brill. 1990). ch. 4.
Robert M. Kingdon, The Political Thoiwht of Peter Martyr Verm,gli (Genêve: Librairie Droz, 1960), pp. i xxin

to address Vermigli’s thought seriously as a whole, one simply cannot neglect his extensive writings on such topics as the authority of princes and magistrates, civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, exile and banish ment, treason, sedition, tyranny, rebellion and war. An easily accessible gauge of the relative importance of these writings is the sheer length of the fourth part of the Loci Communes, ‘wherein is intreated of the out ward meanes which God useth for the salvation of his people, and preser vation of mans societie’)9 Vermigli devotes several times as much space to the treatment of these and related questions as compared with the equivalent sections in the final versions of Calvin’s Institute (1559) or Phillipp Melanchthon’s Common Places (l559).20 By far his most influen tial publication in England, Vermigli’s Loci were compiled posthumously by his editor Robert Masson, minister of the French congregation in London, and went through fourteen editions between 1576 and 1656. An English translation by Anthony Marten, ‘Sewer of the Chamber’ to Queen Elizabeth, 2’took Masson’s edition as its base with a minor rearrangement of the topics, and included a large appendix of letters and opuscula. Many of the letters were Vermigli’s correspondence with such returned Marian exiles as Thomas Sampson, his close confidant John Jewel, and Francis Russell, second Earl of Bedford. The treatise adheres to an order and arrangement closely analogous to that of Calvin’s Institute of the C’hristian Religion. 22It could be argued that Vermigli’s heavier weighting of selected topoi in favour of matters political is attributable to a shift in theological focus at the time of editing, however and therefore not representative of Vermigli’s theological emphasis. After all, the first edition of the Leci C’onin,unes appeared less than four years following the watershed event of the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre in 1572.23 Consequently, the selection of topoi might well reflect the more pressing political concerns of Protestants in the early 1570s (and of Vermigli’s Huguenot edttor then living in London in exile) rather than the reformer’s own theological

“ Loci Communes. ed. Robert Masson (London: John Kingston, 1576). See Joseph C. MLelland. Peter Martyr’s Loci Communes: A Literary History (Montreal: McGill. 2007).
20 Kingdon. Political Thought, p. lit.
21 The Sewer or ‘scutellarius’ was responsible for keeping the utensils and setting the royal table. Marten was appointed before 1560 and retired some time after 1590. I-Se latterly had the privilege 9.8 572644.9 Tm (wr49.4 Tm4res) Tj p

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agenda. On

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however, derives from Vermigli’s extensive Old Testament commentaries,
specifically on

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that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he
departed again into a mountain himself alone’ (in 6:15). Like Gideon,
Christ ‘wayghed the maner of his vocation, and for that his kingdome was
not of this worlde’:° By their refusals, both Gideon and Christ sought to
preserve a clear distinction between the human and divine sources of right.
In this respect, at least, Gideon is a ‘type’ of Christ. Vermigli moves swiftly to the substance of the schohum with his introduction of the institution of the Papacy as an ‘anti-type’:

Gideon iefuseth not the principality, as though he would not labour in the pub-
like ssealth: but because he understode that it was no lawful vocation: which the Popes also ought to regard The Pope ought also to loke upon the words of (hrist: Kinges of the nations (sayth the Loid) bear rule over theyr subjectes:
but ye shal not do so This is to govern the church, not to command, but to
serve.

Thus for Vermigli, unlike the examples of Gideon and Christ, the Bishops
ot Rome have come to confuse human right with divine right, the king
dom of this world with the heavenly kingdom, and earthly authority with
spiritual authority.
This.scholiutn on Judges 8 provides Vermigli with

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argument for a two-fold headship of the Church is based on a distinction
between a metaphorical and a natural head, appealing to the Pauline
observation that as the husband is head of the wife, yet every wife also
has beside her husband her own natural head 57 According to Vermigli,
Fisher falls into the ‘fuse Sillogismus of equivocation’, for ‘if we looke
upon the natural head in the church, we shal finde that it is not one head: but looke how rnanye men there be in it, so many [natural] heades shal there be’ ‘When we speake of the head of the Church, we must keepe our selves in the Metaphore,’ says Vermigli, ‘and as it should be absurde and monstrous, tbr one man to have two natural heades, so shal it be judged as portentous, lr

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edifice of the traditional arguments in support of the papal claim topleni
tudo poteitatls as grounded upon the Pseudo-Isidorian forgeries. 65 Our
adversaries,’ he says, bring the Epistle of Clemens, which is a famed
Epistle, as a thing certaine’. 66 For the sake of argument, Vermigli allows
the authenticity of the forgeries in order to show that in any case they fail
to provide the required support for papal claims. In a putative Letter to James, brother of the Lord, Clement acknowledges him the superscrip tion as by the providence of God ye bishop of bishops, governour of the Church which is at Jerusalem, and of a! the Churches every where’. 67 Even a literal reading of the forged Decretals ‘maketh verye muche agaynste those, which have unto the Churches obtruded this Epistle for true, and ratefied. But that can nothing hurt us,’ Vermigli insists, which is taken out of that epistle, against our doctrine. For we know that it is a fayned thing. as that which was never alledged by any of the fathers these thinges have I rehearsed, onely that we might understand, howe much Gideon is to be preferred before the Antechristes of Rome.’ 65
Yet again Gideon re-emerges at the surface, although Vermigli implies throughout his exegesis that Gideon has never really been far absent. Indeed, he frames papal claims to a universal patriarchate and to juris diction over Christian princes entirely within the exegetical context of Judges 8. Gideon’s refusal to reign over the tribe of Israel as their king rests on the testimony of Scripture, viz. Deuteronomy 17, with its clarity of distinction between divine and human authority. He only should be king whom God has chosen. Vermigh’s exposition of Scripture, the Fathers, and of Gregory the Great in particular (whose authority was much admired by the canon lawyers), combined with his debunking of the Decretals of Pseudo-Isidore are all marshalled to highlight the central concern of Judges 8 namely, what constitutes a valid measure of authority lawfully given? Through the forged Decretals the canon lawyers had effectively rewritten the pre-Constantinian Patristic record in a

° Alihough attacked relentlessly throughout the sixieenth century by a series of critics including Erasmus, the Centuriators of Magdehurg (1559), and Charles du Moulin, editor of the Canon Law (1554>, the authenticity of the Decretals was upheld in the officially sanctioned 1580 edition of the Canon Law, See Gorpus luris canonici emendatuin ci notis illustratum

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This was the Anahaptist inference, but most assuredly not Vermigli’s, nor
indeed that of any of the magisterial Reformers. For the Florentine the
authority of the godly civil magistrate does not inherently conflict with
the elevation of divine rule, On the contrary, the exercise of jurisdiction
in matters of religion exhibits the right relation of human and divine
sources of power as expressed through such passages of Scripture as Judges 8: ‘forasmuch as the administration, wherewith God governeth publike wealthes, hindreth not the Magistrate, which is his Vicar and Minister. And assuredly God raigned together with David and Josias: and the Israelites at that tyme had a certaine Magistrate, and one of their own, with whom also God himselfe also governed.’ 73This passage is sig nificant, for it suggests that it is possible to unite rule by human right and rule by divine right cooperatively yet distinctly, and without the confusion of one with the other, a confusion which Gideon endeavoured to avoid. The problem of kingship as Vermigli formulates it mirrors, in this respect, the logic of Chalcedonian Christology: the difficulty is not so much in the conjunction of the natural or human and the supernatural or divine sources of right. Error arises when there is a failure to distinguish clearly between these two sources of power when they are conjoined, as did the Israelites who offered the kingship to Gideon, or the people in John 6 who offered Christ the kingdom, or the Church in upholding the papal hegemony. Indeed, Vermigli tersely sums up the confusion of the two natures or sources of power by the name of Antechriste’. Once again Vermigli quotes Gregory against the canon lawyers: ‘Vherefore let not our men mervayle, if we sometime cal the bishop of Rome Antechrist, for asmuch as their Gregory, calledth him by that most goodly title, which wilbe universal bishop.’ 74
Vermigli does not allow that the Anabaptist affirmation of solus C’hristu,s Christ’s sole claim to spiritual authority over the universal church annihilates the

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It is for the sake of piety and the public good that Gideon refused the
oiler of a crown, it is also for the sake of piety and the public good that
Vermigli urges rejection of the ‘unlawful Supremacie’ of the papacy. Piety
recognises what belongs to God and what to men, and how to act on that
recognition both privately and politically. In his introduction to the
Nicornachean Ethics Aristotle claims that government is the principal and architectonic art of all practical

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and ecciesiology ultimately irreconcilable? Was the Settlement really tan tamount to Diarmaid MacCulloclis ‘theological cuckoo in the nest’, that is, the embrace of a reformed evangelical teaching within an unreformed conservative institutional setting fundamentally at odds with the first principles proclaimed? 540i alternatively, was the Settlement politically and theologically coherent with the platform of continental magesterial reform? The supposition of such a conflict of theological principle and constitutional practice at the heart of the Elizabethan Church was cer tainly the common view taken by the Settlement’s Disciplinarian puritan critics just as it currently colours the interpretation of the Settlement set lbrward by prevailing ‘English exceptionalist’ historiography. We would argue that closer examination of the contributions of Peter Martyr Vermigli and the Zurich divines to the formulation of the doctrine and order of the English Church provide a corrective to the usual response to this question, and that Vermigli, as representative of what some have teamed ‘the other Reformed tradition’, discloses a path of interpretation open to the compatibility of the doctrine and institutions of the Elizabethan Settlement with a coherent, self-consistent vision of reformed orthodoxy.

“ Diarmad Mae(’ulioeh, The Later Refornat (00 in England, 1547 161)3, 2nd edn (New York:

Paigrave Press, 2000), p. 29. e Wayne Bakei, Heznrwh Ru/linger and the (‘oienant Liii other Reformed Tradition (Athens, OH:
Ohio t mvei soy Piess, 1980).