

ANN-STEPHANE SCHÄFER, *Auctoritas Patrum? The Reception of the Church Fathers in Puritanism*, Mainzer Studien zur Amerikanistik 58 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 449 pp.

At first sight, the project seems to be too ambitious, as it proposes to discuss the appropriation of patristic literature by the Puritans in England and New England. The topic presupposes the author's expertise in two rather different types of literature: Greek and Latin Church Fathers on the one hand and the extremely prolific output of mainly seventeenth-century English-speaking Puritan writers on both sides of the Atlantic on the other. The exhaustive list of primary literature is definitely a challenge for the reviewer (cf. 405-23). The list of secondary literature of almost the same length is likewise impressive (cf. 425-42). Without the massive and relatively recent volumes of Irena Backus and Leif Grane et al.,¹ the author would probably not have found a proper scholarly context for her project.

The book consists of six chapters: the first is simply called "Introduction." Here, the author defines her categories as 'Puritanism' and 'church-fathers' and proposes two theses. Her first thesis is that Puritan exegesis is mainly informed by the exegetical practice of the church fathers, and the second one is that the Puritans saw themselves as the typological antitypes of the ancient churches of the first centuries.

Chapter two offers a close reading of William Perkins's *Probleme of Forged Catholicisme, or Universalitie of the Romish Religion*. Schäfer argues that Perkins explicitly endorsed the category of *auctoris patrum* but was especially keen to prove that the Roman Catholic Church discontinued this tradition. Perkins quoted Vincent of Lérin's famous dictum that the catholic church is the one "that only bee beleevd and taught, which hath been held in *all* places at *all* times and of *all* professors" (qtd. in Schäfer 39). However, in Perkins's view, the Church of Rome corrupted this concept of universality, antiquity, and consent. Thus, Perkins does not see any problem in reconciling the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* and the Catholic principles of

auctoritas patrum, *argumentum patrum*, or even *consensus patrum*.

Chapter three provides a useful historical perspective on the concept of *auctoritas patrum* throughout the Middle Ages and the Reformation period. A notable omission from the survey of the English reception of the idea is the work of the martyr-reformer John Frith (1503-1533), whose answer to Sir Thomas More's vindication of the Catholic view of the Eucharist was written shortly before his execution.² In this work, Frith devoted a whole chapter to discussing the views of the Fathers. Frith was seen as the greatest intellect of the early English Reformation. Ironically, the newly appointed archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), still holding Catholic views of the Eucharist, was one of the authorities that condemned him. In a few years time, this same Cranmer came to endorse the views of Frith and the Swiss reformers on the figurative interpretation of the Lord's Supper. Consequently, he too was condemned and burned at stake. The rest of chapter three provides important (but not always exciting) encyclopedic information on institutions of Puritan learning. The author offers a closer look at Puritan education at Trinity and Emmanuel Colleges in Cambridge, England and Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Schäfer also introduces the library resources of these colleges. This chapter gets more exciting when the author illuminates the tradition of the Commonplace Book by demonstrating the patristic evidence in the work.

Chapter four, "Exegesis in Theory and Practice," is the most valuable part of the book and treats hermeneutics, homiletics, and preaching. However, the introductory part of the "Principles of Puritan Hermeneutics" contains some questionable statements such as: "the concept of the fourfold sense, a literary approach whose origins can be traced back to the exegesis of the Alexandrian church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen" (149). Contrary to this statement, Origen stood for the idea of the threefold senses based on his trichotome anthropology. Another inaccuracy is the author's statement that "Theodoret of

¹ Irena Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2 vols., (1993) and Leif Grane et al. (ed.), *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, 2 vols. (1993 and 1998)

² John Frith, *A Book Made by John Frith Prisoner in the Tower of London Answering Unto M. More's Letter, which he wrote Against the First, Little Treatise that John Frith Made Concerning The Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ* (London, 1533).

Cyrus” is the second of the Antiochian fathers rather than “Diodore of Tarsus” (150).

Apart from such minor mistakes, Schäfer shows her deep knowledge of Cotton Mather’s *Biblia Americana* and proves her exegetical skills in the chapter on biblical commentary. She is right when she says that Cotton Mather scholars “occasionally touch upon the ‘Biblia Americana’ [...] yet [...] these scholars have not focused on the commentary” (156). Like most Protestant authors, Cotton Mather also embraced the idea of the primacy of literal interpretation and disapproves of the medieval idea of the fourfold senses. He also defended the integrity of the text and acknowledged the existence of dark places of Scripture that must be opened up by the exegete, to which typology is one of the keys. Schäfer praises Mather for admitting his own intellectual limits in interpretation. Another interesting observation of the author is that Cotton Mather was in harmony with the Fathers in reading Genesis 1:1 spiritually when suggesting that the “beginning” means “Christ” (184). Thus, the first sentence of Scripture can be read as “In Christ did God create the heaven and the world” (188). Schäfer concludes her discussion of *Biblia Americana* by stating that the “‘Biblia Americana’ not only relies on the force of the *argumentum patrum*, but Mather even goes so far as to claim the *consensus patrum* for his exegesis” (199). It is shown how Mather’s biblical commentary is different from other commentaries by contemporary Puritan divines.

Schäfer also analyzes Harvard President John Leverett’s Saturday lectures “Expositions of Scripture” (1708-1724), showing the author’s profound knowledge of the Fathers and his explicit exhortation of Harvard students: “*Patres sunt honorandi*.” The Protestant ideal of plain style is introduced in the close reading of William Perkins’s *The Arte of Prophecy-ing*. Perkins claimed that the preacher should learn from the Fathers’ anti-heretical writings.

As for Puritan preaching, we learn that “New England ministers usually preached twice every Sunday—in the morning as well as in the afternoon—and they also delivered a weekday lecture once per week on the so-called Lecture day” (245). While later Puritan preachers, such as John Mitchell and Samuel Parris, seem to have made less appeal to patristic sources than their predecessors, their political homilies and the so-called election-sermons contained many explicit references to the Fathers and the early church.

Chapter five is on ecclesiology. According to Schäfer, New England ministers appealed to the church fathers, especially to Cyprian and St Augustine, in their debate with their opponents. Separatists, such as Baptists (e.g., John Smyth), were seen as the antitypes of Donatist heretics. Both opponents and supporters of the “Half Way Covenant” (a more liberal baptismal policy) appealed to the writings of the church fathers.

In conclusion, scholars should be grateful to Schäfer for opening hidden libraries, introducing a wide array of formerly lesser-known books of Puritan literature and successfully substantiating her two theses. Her book is based on thorough and careful philological research; it is indeed an invaluable source of information and insights. The amount of material analyzed is more than impressive. However, throughout the book, the author, on the evidence of the material discussed, has frequently come to a certain (rather monotonous) *quod erat demonstrandum* type of conclusion.

This important work could have been even more fruitful had Schäfer been more courageous in challenging and refuting some recent critical assumptions that may have contradicted her proposed two theses. However, all in all, this book indeed fills a gap in Early American Studies.

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