History and theology

A conversation with Richard Hooker

Katherine Rainger

To be a theologian is to be exposed to the vision of heaven and to the tragedies of mankind.¹

Michael Ramsey’s observation, quoted above, highlights the tensions and challenges involved in living a life of faith. As Christians we live with the grand vision of God’s love and desire for the world, yet we also experience the reality of humanity living in a fallen world. While living within this tension, our vocation is to bear witness to the revelation of God in Christ. What this looks like in the twenty-first century is at times uncertain, as we are faced with complex and difficult issues which have the potential to be hugely divisive. Within the Anglican tradition there are rich intellectual resources from which to draw wisdom as we navigate these challenges. The writings of Richard Hooker (1554–1600) in particular, are representative

Katherine Rainger is a Master of Theology student at St Mark’s National Theological Centre. She teaches at Arawang Primary School and serves as Youth and Children Worker at Holy Covenant Anglican Church in Canberra.
of a theological approach within Anglicanism that incorporates both the
timeless revelation of God and the subjective nature of human life embodied
in specific times and places. This article examines one key aspect of that
approach: Hooker’s understanding of history.

Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century Anglican theologian and priest,
is one of the most highly regarded and influential figures in Anglicanism. 2
Hooker’s massive treatise, Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity, provided a
positive defence for the Church of England during a particularly divisive
and polemical period in English history.3 Hooker specifically addressed his
Puritan opponents and their hermeneutical assumptions and criticisms of
the governance of the Church of England. Yet his writings remain a resource
for Christians today due to the overarching principles espoused within them.
Foremost of these principles is Hooker’s understanding of the eternal laws
which God has established and by which creation is bound. 4 For Hooker,
ecclesiology is understood in relation to this interconnected framework of
law. Revelation takes place within the natural law associated with reason
and through the divine law found in Scripture, of which the Church is both
guardian and interpreter. 5 Furthermore, and of importance to this article,
is Hooker’s suggestion that the interpretation and application of law, even
divine law, may be historically contingent. 6

Rowan Williams argues that Hooker is perhaps the first major European
theologian to assume that history—both corporate and individual—matters
for theology. 7 Williams contends that Hooker’s theology is distinctive in his
willingness to accept that time and place are contributing factors to the way
faith is experienced. 8 For Hooker the movements, constraints and frailties
of human history are where divine action is at work. Yet this interpretation
of Hooker’s assumption about history must be viewed in the context of
Hooker’s overall treatise. Williams’ interpretation of Hooker is accurate,
although this article questions whether Hooker was unique in this regard,
and suggests rather that his emphasis on history was in fact consistent with
broader currents of Reformation thought.

History as a component of Hooker’s theological method

History within Hooker’s theological schema can refer to one of three com-
ponents. The first relates to the Christological content of theology. God
has acted within history, suggests Hooker, in the incarnation of Christ.
Christology is the foundation of Hooker’s sacramental theology, since the
force of the sacraments is that they make us ‘partakers of Christ.’9 This divine action which takes place within history reveals the deeper truth that ‘there is a hidden action of God beneath the generally unbroken surface of the world’s processes.’10 God is present and yet hidden while at work within the ‘complex interlocking of human experience.’11 When we receive the gifts of divine action—as a historical reality in Christ’s humanity, in the Eucharist, and in the lives of holy people—the effects of divine action, that is, union with Christ, will follow.12 The priority of divine action is a further important consideration in Hooker’s notion of Christology, the Eucharist and the Church. The Church, for example, ‘exists and is sustained by God’s action, not by human consensus.’13

The second component of Hooker’s use of history relates to the ways in which God has guided the Church throughout its life.14 This has allowed wisdom and precedent to accumulate, which can in turn be used to guide the Church and protect her from novelty and subjectivity.15 Hooker’s ‘historical sense’ allows him to regard ‘the Church’s development as being directed, controlled and under the hand of God’.16 The historic episcopacy is an example of this. While Hooker does not unequivocally regard bishops as a necessity for the Christian faith and church government, they have been an effective part of the Church’s witness and practice, and therefore it is valid that they be retained. ‘Better to trust our history,’ argues Hooker, ‘where it does not appear to actively mislead us.’17 Hooker validates the history of the Church and discerns the prior movements of God in guiding the Church to consensus and catholicity.18

A third component of history is present in Hooker’s theology. Due to the relentless progress of history, contends Hooker, ‘continuous and gradual change is inevitable and indeed desirable.’19 Hooker argued, for example, that Calvin’s church governance structure was not false because it fell under the ‘accessory’ or ‘things indifferent’ (adiaphora) category of the Church’s teaching. For Hooker it was necessary to acknowledge that Calvin’s governance structure was a result of historical circumstances in sixteenth-century Geneva, rather than a result of direct Scriptural warrant. Political expediency and historical development, therefore, played an important role in the life and organisation of the Church.20

Although Williams discusses all these three components of Hooker’s understanding of history, it is this final aspect which Williams has in mind when he declares that Hooker ‘is perhaps the first major European theologian
History, understood in this context, relates to the contingent nature of human life and its proneness to sin, error and instability, and the acknowledgement that time and place will affect the way we interpret and apply the Christian faith through an interplay of Scripture, reason and tradition.

This understanding of history has several implications. The first is that certainty relating to those ‘things accessory’ to ‘the verie essence of Christianitie’ must be applied cautiously. For Hooker there are also ‘things necessary’ for salvation:

> whatsoever is unto salvation termed necessary by way of excellency, whatsoever it standeth all men upon to know or do that they may be saved ... of which sort the articles of Christian faith and the sacraments of the church of Christ are.

Elements of order, however, such as governance and liturgical custom, are ‘accessory’ to the word and sacraments. With regard to these accessory features, writes Hooker, ‘the mind doth rather follow probable persuasions.’

A second implication of Hooker’s interpretation of history is that although natural law does not change, an aspect of positive law (that is, the supernatural law found within Scripture) may at ‘some new growne occasion’ require alteration. For Hooker, positive law exists in two categories: the first is ‘mixed’, which amounts to the ratification of natural law; and the second is that which is ‘merely’ positive and can be changed as the Church deems necessary and appropriate, depending on the ‘ende for which it was made, and by the aptnese of thinges therein prescribed unto the same end.’

Stephen Sykes applies Hooker’s methodology to the issue of female ordination to the priesthood. In previous centuries, injunctions such as 1 Timothy 2:12, which forbade women from teaching, supported the natural law/reason as it was understood at the time. Now that natural law/reason no longer provides evidence for the intellectual inferiority of women, what once was a ‘mixed’ positive law now becomes part of the ‘merely’ positive law and can be changed to meet the historic circumstances of the Church in a cultural setting where women can hold positions of public office.

There is always a need in the Church for discernment and a clear understanding of what is ‘necessary’ and what is ‘accessory’ in matters of faith and conduct. ‘Although no laws but positive be mutable,’ writes Hooker, ‘yet all
are not mutable which be positive.’ This work must be done, however, for the Church has the authority to do this, and not to adapt will be detrimental to the life of the Church in the circumstances in which it finds itself:

The whole body of Christ hath power to alter, with general consent and upon necessary occasions, even the positive laws of the apostles, if there be no command to the contrary, and it manifestly appears to her, that change of times have clearly taken away the very reasons of God’s first institution.29

A third implication of Hooker’s understanding of history is that Scripture itself is bound by historical circumstances and should be interpreted with regard to the time and place in which it was originally written.30 On this point Hooker was in disagreement with English Puritans but in agreement with continental Reformers such as Luther and Calvin. Hooker advocated a Christocentric reading of Scripture which meant that the purpose of Scripture was to provide us with ‘supernatural knowledge so that we might be saved everlastingly’.31 The proper use of Scripture required, therefore, that the Old Testament be read with the historical context of the text in view, rather than as a rule of life to be followed for contemporary Christians. Other sources such as reason needed to be employed to guide Christians in aspects of life on which Scripture was silent.32 Without this hermeneutic the precepts of Scripture were in danger of being multiplied and misconstrued:

When that which the word of God doth but deliver historically, we construe without any warrant as if it were legally meant, and so urge it further [than] we can prove that it was intended, do we not add to the laws of God, and make them in number seem more than they are?33

Adaptation, for Hooker, was therefore a central and necessary aspect of Christian life and practice. The actions of the primitive Church, on Hooker’s view, could not and should not be directly transposed as a model for the sixteenth-century Church.34 Sykes detects a ‘profundity and subtlety’ within Hooker’s theological stance due to his appreciation of the social reality of the Church in time and history.35 This is underscored by Hooker’s insistence on the dual nature of the Church as being both ‘societie and a societie supernaturall’36.
‘Contemplative pragmatism’

Williams identifies within Hooker’s theology a ‘distinctive Anglican mood’, which Williams labels ‘contemplative pragmatism.’ It is pragmatic insofar as it allows for the full scope of accumulated historical precedent to bear an appropriate degree of influence. Yet this is within a framework which is also contemplative, in the sense that for Hooker the guiding principles are received as part of the divine gift of Christ: ‘uncovering the pattern of ‘wisdom’ in the universe.’ The Anglican mood is therefore exemplified by a tension between being sure of the end goal, which is established in and through Christ, and remaining reticent, due to human finitude and sin, about comprehensive formulations established to meet this end goal.

Is this unique to Hooker?

The preceding analysis of Hooker’s theology supports Williams’ argument that history mattered within Hooker’s scheme. This is seen in Hooker’s understanding of history as the reality within which God makes God-self known; history as accumulated consensus and connection with the past; and history as the temporal and circumstantial element of human life. I have argued—as does Williams—that history is not understood in isolation in Hooker’s theology. Rather, history is within the overall framework of eternal law, established by God, which is the expression of God’s being and God’s revelation. For Hooker the universe ‘is drenched with Deity.’

What of Williams’ statement that Hooker’s historical assumptions were unique to him? Nigel Atkinson argues that Luther and Calvin also understood the importance of history: in terms of God’s acts of redemption taking place in history; in the churches’ continuity with the past; in the action of God in making revelation ‘continuous with the course of history’; and in ‘historical contextualisation’ in terms of reading the Scriptures. Atkinson suggests that Hooker in all these instances was in fact employing a Reformation principle, rather than something which was unique to his methodology or to a particularly Anglican framework. If Atkinson is correct, then there is a need for more nuance in Williams’ argument that Hooker was the first major European theologian to assume that history mattered for theology. Williams has also observed that history for Hooker was the ‘recognition that contingent circumstance, human error and sin, and the instability of our personal passions and sensibilities all shape what we think we believe in ways that should make us very cautious about at
least some of our claims.  

41 This reticence is also, according to Williams, ‘a quite orthodox Reformed pessimism about human capacity.’ 42 Williams is right in arguing that history was a determining factor in Hooker’s theology. Whether or not Hooker’s particular application was unique to him, or was in line with a broader Reformation principle, is a matter of ongoing debate within Hooker scholarship. 43

Conclusion

Richard Hooker’s influence within Anglicanism is evident in the content and method of Anglican theology. First principles, the dual nature of the Church as ‘societie and a societie supernaturall’, and the interplay of theology and history are all part of Hooker’s legacy. 44 This article has evaluated the way in which history, and in particular the fragile and circumstantial nature of the human condition, must be taken into account when attempting the task of theology. This article has also questioned whether this was unique to Hooker or indicative of a widely applied Reformation principle.

Hooker’s treatise, and Anglicanism more broadly, is characterised by a belief in the providential presence of God within human life, seen most fully in the incarnation of God in Christ for the sake of the world. 45 Anglicanism is also committed to change and reform as historical circumstances warrant reassessment of God’s call in specific times and place. 46

Nevertheless, throughout the changing, complex and often challenging task of being faithful to the message of Christ within spatial and temporal realities, the divine action of God remains. As Hooker put it:

A more dutiful and religious way for us were to admire the wisdom of God, which shineth in the beautiful variety of all things, but most in the manifold and yet harmonious dissimilitude of those ways, whereby his Church upon earth is guided from age to age, throughout all generations of men. 47

Endnotes


9. W David Neelands, ‘Christology and the Sacraments,’ in WJ Torrance Kirby (ed.), *A Companion to Richard Hooker*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, 369; Hooker, *Lawes*, V, I, 3. ‘Sacraments,’ adds Hooker, ‘are the powerful instruments of God to eternal life. For as our natural life consisteth in the union of the body with the soul; so our life supernatural in the union of the soul with God ... it seemeth requisite that we first consider how God is in Christ, then how Christ is in us, and how the Sacraments do serve to make us partakers of Christ. In other things we may be more brief, but the weight of these requireth largeness.’


17. Williams, ‘Hooker the Theologian,’ 115.


23. Hooker, Lawes, III, iii, 4; III, iv, 1.
24. Hooker, Lawes, III, iii, 4; III, iv, 1.
26. Avis, Anglicanism and the Christian Church, p. 58; Hooker, Lawes, III, x, 5.
27. Hooker, Lawes, III, x, 1.
28. Skyes, Unashamed Anglicanism, p. 94.
32. Avis, Anglicanism and the Christian Church, p. 65.
35. Skyes, Unashamed Anglicanism, p. 84.
36. Hooker, Lawes, I, xv, 2.
38. This resonates with the ‘practical divinity’ which John Stafford, ‘Practical Divinity,’ in A Companion to Richard Hooker, ed. Torrance Kirby, Brill, Leiden, 2008, p. 536, discerns in Hooker’s writing. Hooker’s writing, suggests Stafford, is imbued with a deep concern for the pastoral implications of his theology. This is evident in Hooker’s argument that God’s grace was able to extend to Christians who, though they may be in error, had retained the foundations of the faith; in his reluctance to demarcate membership of the Church on the grounds of matters ‘accessory’; and in Hooker’s grappling with the serious issues of suffering and sin whilst providing his audience with assurance of divine mercy and grace. John Stafford. See also William Marshall, Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Selective View of Anglican Theology through the Centuries, The Columba Press, Dublin, 2010, p. 79.
41. Williams, ‘Hooker the Theologian, p. 106.
42. Williams, ‘Hooker the Theologian, p. 106.


45. Kaye, ‘Anglican Belief,’ p. 44.
