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## Auctoritas Patrum?

The Reception of the  
Church Fathers in Puritanism

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# 1 Introduction

In 1631, after he had been suspended from his office as a preacher by bishop William Laud on account of non-conformity with the Church of England, Thomas Shepard (1605-1649) delved into theological studies. In his autobiography, the Puritan remembers how his reading changed his perception of the rites of the established church; he also recalls a dialog between him and his persecutor Laud, who summoned the dissenter to appear before him to question him particularly on his current occupation and the subject of his literary studies:

. . . remaining about half a year after this silencing among them [i.e. his parish at Earles-Colne], the Lord let me see into the evil of the English ceremonies, cross, surplice, and kneeling and the Bishop of London, viz., Laud, coming down to visit, he cited me to appear before him at the Court at Reldon where, I appearing he asked me what I did in the place, and I told him I studied; he asked me what – I told him the fathers; he replied I might thank him for that, yet charged me to depart the place.<sup>1</sup>

Here the reader cannot but notice that, first, Shepard apparently found central Puritan convictions, for example concerning church ceremonies, to be supported by the principles of early Christian churches; second, the incidence also indicates that both the silenced Puritan preacher and his opponent bishop Laud cherished patristic learning and venerate the church fathers.

Sparked by humanistic learning, the fascination for antiquity and the urge to go back *ad fontes*, the reformers had actually never completely abandoned the church fathers; in fact, “they all cited the Fathers.”<sup>2</sup> In general, however, the

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Shepard, “The Autobiography,” *God’s Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge*, ed. Michael McGiffert, rev. ed. (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1994) 52 (underlined emphasis added). The account was first published in *Pub. of the Col. Soc. of MA* 27 (1927-30): 343-400 and is cited below as “Autobiography.”

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century*, Oxford-Warburg Studies (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) 24. Cf., for example, Johannes van Oort, “John Calvin and the Church Fathers,” *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 661-700; Antony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1999); Manfred Schulze, “Martin Luther and the Church Fathers,” *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 573-626; Irena Backus, “Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer and the Church Fathers,” *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 627-660; Scott H. Hendrix, “Deparentifying the Fathers: The Reformers and Patristic

reformation with its emphasis of *sola scriptura* had led to a relative devaluation of church tradition including early church documents, which were now dismissed as so-called “unwritten traditions,” i.e. as texts not contained in the biblical canon.<sup>3</sup> The church fathers as the major representatives of this tradition had been dominating theological discourses for centuries;<sup>4</sup> whereas they had originally been called to the witness stand against the arbitrary exegesis of heretical groups,<sup>5</sup> medieval scholastics ultimately developed argumentative strategies that allowed them to read the Bible and establish church doctrine based primarily on the *argumentum patrum*, i.e. patristic arguments. In other words, compared with church tradition, scriptural proof and exegesis had become less important in determining the beliefs and practices of the church. Bracing for the Protestant *sola scriptura*, Roman Catholics in fact reasserted and codified this principle in the Council of Trent (1546), which stipulated that both the Bible and “unwritten” church tradition be treated as equally important to establish truth and which forbade interpretations of the Bible that contradicted the unanimous consent of the fathers. It is important to note that in the Church of England, there “was a much greater consideration for the Fathers than that which was commonly associated with continental Protestantism;”<sup>6</sup> therefore non-conformist English divines never grew tired of accusing the established church of its lack of true reformation and inappropriate reliance on non-scriptural tradition and the *auctoritas patrum*. Whereas moderate Church of England theologians would continue to defend the established structures by producing patristic testimony, the more radical Puritan divines were notable for

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Authority,” *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, ed. Leif Grane et al., Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Beiheft 37 (Mainz: Zabern, 1993) 55-68.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ulrich Luz, “Die Bedeutung der Kirchenväter für die Auslegung der Bibel: Eine westlich protestantische Sicht,” *Auslegung der Bibel in orthodoxer und westlicher Perspektive*, ed. James D. G. Dunn et al., Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 130 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 29-52.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Andreas Merkt, *Das patristische Prinzip: Eine Studie zur theologischen Bedeutung der Kirchenväter*, Supplements to Virgiliae Christianae 58 (Leiden et al.: Brill, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ekkehard Mühlenberg, “Patristik,” *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 26, ed. Gerhard Müller et al., 36 vols., vol. 26 (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1996) 97-106. Cf. Vincent of Lérins’s theology as discussed in connection with William Perkins’s treatment of the church fathers (chapters 2.1) and in chapter 3.1.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Louis Quantin, “The Fathers in Seventeenth Century Anglican Theology,” *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 987. Cf. also Henry Chadwick, “Tradition, Fathers and Councils,” *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes, John Booty and Jonathan Knight, rev. ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1998) 100-114; Arthur Middleton, *Fathers and Anglicans: The Limits of Orthodoxy* (Hertfordshire: Gracewing, 2001); S. L. Greenslade, *The English Reformers and the Fathers of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1960).

their “antagonism to the formula of Bible *and* Fathers that had been organic to the original English Reformation”<sup>7</sup> and thus “were driven to radicalize the traditional Protestant commitment to biblical supremacy.”<sup>8</sup>

At first glance it might therefore seem surprising that Thomas Shepard, who was soon to leave England for Massachusetts Bay Colony and became one of the most influential representatives of seventeenth-century New England Puritanism, should have turned to early church history and patristic writing for theological orientation; yet Shepard is by far not the only Puritan author to draw inspiration from the church fathers’ writings: Thus John Foxe (1516-1587) frequently refers to early church persecutions – a theme that was of vital importance to the Puritan community – and presents its martyrs’ steadfastness as a model worthy of emulation in his seminal *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1563)<sup>9</sup>; William Perkins (1558-1602), seeking to disprove the notion that the Roman Catholic church was the legitimate heir of the patristic age, wrote a manual entitled *Probleme of the Forged Catholicisme, or Universalitie of the Romish Religion* (London, 1631; Latin orig. 1604)<sup>10</sup>, and the handbook was identified as “*An Introduction to Young Students in the Reading of the Fathers*” on the title page; John Cotton (1584-1652) uses the example of the early church to legitimize Congregational church polity in *The Way of Congregational Churches Cleared* (London, 1647) and on other occasions draws on the church fathers for illustration, for example when praising Thomas Hooker’s ministry as the embodiment of Augustine’s dreams;<sup>11</sup> also, as late as in the early eighteenth century, Cotton Mather (1663-1728) recommended the church fathers as role models,<sup>12</sup> and excused Harvard College’s first president Henry Dunster, who

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<sup>7</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988) 29.

<sup>8</sup> Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives* 26.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. James C. W. Truman, “John Foxe and the Desires of Reformation Martyrology,” *English Literary History* 70.1 (Spring 2003): 35.

<sup>10</sup> William Perkins, *Probleme of the Forged Catholicisme, or Universalitie of the Romish Religion*, 1604, *Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, M. W. Perkins*, by Perkins, 1604 Latin ed., 1631, 3 vols., vol. 2 (London, 1631) 485-602. The work is henceforth referred to as *Probleme*.

<sup>11</sup> “To see three things was holy *Austins* wish / *Rome* in her Flower, Christ Jesus in the Flesh, / And Paul i’th Pulpit; Lately men might see, / Two first, and more, in *Hookers* Ministry” [John Cotton, “On My Reverend and Dear Brother, Mr. Thomas Hooker, late Pastor of the Church at Hartford on Connecticut,” *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline...*, by Thomas Hooker (London, 1648)] xxv.

<sup>12</sup> “What sort of Pastory did often illuminate the Churches of the Primitive Christians. . . . Read the Lives of the Fathers, and you will see, They were Man that spent abundance of time in Prayer with Fasting before the Lord. . . .” [Cotton Mather, *The Good Old Way, Or, Christianity Described, from the Glorious Lustre of It Appearing in the Lives of the Primitive Christians...* (Boston, 1706) 68].

had opposed more liberal baptismal policies, by stressing the fact that even the church fathers were not infallible.<sup>13</sup>

Against this background, is it possible to assume that it was a mere coincidence that Thomas Shepard turned to the church fathers' writings to seek answers to pressing contemporary concerns? This study argues that this is in fact not the case; quite to the contrary, it seeks to demonstrate that Puritan authors both in England and New England were not only deeply influenced by patristic thought, but also that they systematically used early church writing for argumentative purposes even though they would, as will be also demonstrated, officially reject the appeal to the patristic legacy and deny that the church fathers could function as arbiters in theological disputes as claimed by Roman Catholics and Church of England clergymen. Jean-Louis Quantin has shown that Christian antiquity played a significant role in the construction of confessional identity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for Church of England divines; it is therefore to be expected that the church fathers would also be central points of orientation for Puritan apologists in England and especially New England.

So far, the question of how Puritan theologians treat the church fathers in their spoken and written discourses seems to have received surprisingly little attention compared to the Puritans' strict adherence to *sola scriptura* hermeneutics and their preachers' embrace of the plain style rule, which have both been the subject of a considerable body of scholarship.<sup>14</sup> The number of studies that generally seek to counter the notion that the Puritans represent a narrow, one-dimensional Biblicist exegesis and for that purpose draw attention to the Puritans' indebtedness to the church fathers is in fact quite limited. Some authors acknowledge – though mostly in passing – the fact that Puritan writers draw on a variety of non-biblical sources such as the “fathers of the Catholic church including Augustine and Aquinas;”<sup>15</sup> yet ultimately, many again stress the Puritan propensity to reaffirm the primacy of the Scriptures, though for example Lisa M. Gordis vaguely points to the “wide variety of human

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England from its First Planting in the Year 1620 unto the Year of our Lord, 1698*, 1702, Books III-VII, 1852, repr. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967) bk. III, 405-406.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. chapter 4.2.1.

<sup>15</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Lebanon, NH: UP of New England, 1995) 15. According to Samuel Eliot Morison, “[a] Puritan minister must be able to expound the Sacred Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek, and be cognizant of what the Church Fathers, the Scholastic Philosophers, and the Reformers had written, in Greek and Latin” [Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1936) 3].

interpretive aids”<sup>16</sup> Puritan exegetes employed when interpreting the Bible. Also, the overwhelming majority of reception studies deals with the reception of classical antiquity,<sup>17</sup> the Puritans’ attachment to Pauline theology<sup>18</sup> or investigates the extent to which Old Testament typology informs Puritan writing.<sup>19</sup>

Those studies that indeed focus on the patristic legacy tend to be concerned with the reception of Augustine as the most influential of the church fathers. In fact, Perry Miller claims that Augustine was more popular than even the reformers among Puritan readers,<sup>20</sup> and he famously diagnoses New England Puritans with an “Augustinian strain of piety,”<sup>21</sup> a thesis that Colin John Cruickshank further elaborates and illustrates in his dissertation entitled “Saint Augustine in Early New England.”<sup>22</sup> The past decades have witnessed a renewed scholarly interest in the church fathers and their reception in various phases of European intellectual history,<sup>23</sup> it is thus maybe not surprising that Theodore Dwight Bozeman has explored the primitivist dimension of Puritanism, pointing

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<sup>16</sup> Lisa M. Gordis, *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2003) 5.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., for example, Richard M. Gummere, *The American Colonial Mind and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963); David S. Shields, *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* (Knoxville, TN: U of Tennessee P, 2001); Josephine K. Piercy, *Studies in Literary Types in Seventeenth Century America, 1607-1710* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1969); Winton U. Solberg, “Cotton Mather, The Christian Philosopher, and the Classics,” *Proc. of the American Antiquarian Soc.* 96 (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Soc., 1987) 323-367; Gustaaf van Cromphout, “Cotton Mather as Plutarchan Biographer,” *American Literature* 46 (1974/75): 465-481; Sacvan Bercovitch, “New England Epic: Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*,” *English Literary History* 33 (1966): 337-350.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. John S. Coolidge, *The Pauline Renaissance in England: Puritanism and the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Cf., for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *Typology in Early American Literature* (Amherst, MA: U of Massachusetts P, 1972); Linda Munk, *The Devil’s Mousetrap: Redemption and Colonial American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1954) 93.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Miller, *New England Mind* 3-34.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Colin John Cruickshank, “Saint Augustine in Early New England,” diss., U of Maine, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Irena Backus, ed., *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Leif Grane et al., ed., *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Beiheft 37 (Mainz: Zabern, 1993); Leif Grane et al., ed., *Auctoritas Patrum II: Neue Beiträge zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Beiheft 44 (Mainz: Zabern, 1998).