

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ROBERT PERSONS'S *CONFERENCE* IN CONTINENTAL CONTEXT*

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ABSTRACT. *This article seeks to explain some political and theoretical layers of Robert Persons's Conference about the next succession (1595). By examining a Latin manuscript version of the text which appeared in Rome in 1596 and by analysing the context in which this Latin version was composed and the aims which it was intended to fulfil, this article elucidates the political and religious implications of Persons's text, not only in the context of English or British debates over the succession to Elizabeth, but also in a European-wide scenario. Such an approach, I argue, can allow historians of early modern England to gain a deeper and wider understanding of English Catholicism and of its relevance in European political and religious history.*

In 1595 *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of England* was published in Antwerp, under the pseudonym of R. Doleman.¹ The book's author was the English Jesuit, Robert Persons, and its content angered and preoccupied Protestants and Catholics alike.²

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¹ R. Doleman, *A conference about the next succession to the crowne of England* ([Antwerp], 1594 [vere 1595]).

² On the authorship and reception of Doleman's *Conference* see P. Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception of *A conference about the next succession to the crown of England*', *Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), pp. 415–29; and V. Houlston, 'The hare and the drum: Robert Persons's writings on the English succession, 1593–1596', *Renaissance Studies*, 14 (2000), pp. 235–50, at pp. 235–8. Peter Holmes in the aforementioned article makes a highly convincing case to attribute the *Conference* to Persons (see especially pp. 420–4). I, like most of current scholarship, accept Holmes's attribution, and as a further piece of evidence to corroborate Holmes's thesis I would like to add a letter written by Crichton to Persons in which Crichton reproached Persons for having written a number of books which, albeit being 'true', were nevertheless 'odious, such as the Leicester's Commonwealth, a book that brought perpetual infamy to that person ... and the book of Dolam [sic], who has greatly displeased all Scots and many Englishmen ... and which has rather harmed than helped His Catholic Majesty, as many Spaniards, and the most intelligent ones, admit' ('benche la materia delli libri ch'ha scritto sia vera, pur è odiosa, come la Republica del Conte de Leicester; è libro di perpetua infamia de quella persona ... Il libro de Dolam [sic] ha dispiaciuto grandemente a tutti gli scozzesi molti Inglesi ... et ha piu tosto nuociuto che profitato a sua Maesta Catholica, come molti spagnoli et delli più intelligenti

Persons's *Conference*, dedicated to the earl of Essex, is divided into two parts. The first is a theoretical discussion of the origin, nature, and aim of political government. Starting from the Aristotelian, Thomist, and neo-Thomist principle that 'sociability in mankind, or inclination to live in company, is by nature, and consequently ordained by God',³ Persons argues that the political authority, necessary to unite the society of men, resides by natural and divine law in the whole body of the commonwealth, that can decide to delegate its *potestas* to the prince. Such a transfer, however, is not permanent. Rather, Persons argues, it 'is given with such restrictions ... promises and othes [sic] of both parties ... as if the same be not kept, but wilfully broken, on ether part, then is the other not bounde to observe his promise nether'.⁴ In other words, given the contractual nature of such transfer of authority, the prince can be removed by the commonwealth if he fails to comply with the pact stipulated with his people.

The second part of Persons's text is a history of the royal dynasties in England, and a survey of possible successors to Elizabeth's throne. Since the grounds for any sovereign's authority is the pact stipulated with the people, blood line should not be the only criterion on the basis of which the successor should be chosen. For this reason, Catholic candidates to the English crown, including the Infanta of Spain, should not be discarded in favour of princes who were deemed heretical, although more closely related by blood.

Persons's book occupies an interesting niche in the context of the historiography of English Catholicism. If one reads the text as a pamphlet advocating another form of direct Spanish intervention in English affairs, and reiterating the theme of the so-called 'Black legend' of the 'evil' Jesuits, involved in plotting and scheming to overthrow and eliminate Protestant sovereigns, then the *Conference* can be said to contain all the ingredients of a more politically aggressive Jesuitical means of understanding the relationship between politics and religion in early modern England. Indeed, the historiographical controversy over the authorship of the text reflects, in some measure, a broader historiographical debate over the nature of Elizabethan Catholicism with reference to the role of the Jesuits.⁵

More recently, historians of early modern England have adopted a different approach to the text, and, starting with Peter Holmes, have increasingly concentrated on the theoretical dimension of the book's quasi-contractual theory of government and its significance in an English political context. This has produced new and important interpretations of the role of Catholic political thought in England. As Peter Lake has recently argued, understanding the *Conference* within the European context of 'the more radical 'republican', populist and

confessano', Crichton to Persons, Louvain, 27 Feb. 1598, in Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI), Anglia 31, vol. II, fos. 713–23 at fo. 721). ³ *A conference*, pp. 3–4. ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ Among those scholars who argued for the seditious nature of Persons's text see A. L. Rowse, *The England of Elizabeth* (London, 1950), pp. 461 and ff, and M. L. Carrafiello, *Robert Persons and English Catholicism, 1580–1610* (Selinsgrove, PA, 1998), pp. 115 and ff. On the links between the historiographical debate over the authorship of the text and that over the nature of English Catholicism see Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception', pp. 415–16 and 428–9.

resistance-centered currents that had swept through the second half of the sixteenth century' allows historians to appreciate the wider implications of, for instance, James's absolutism.⁶ At the same time, other scholars have increasingly toned down the more explicit political agenda expressed in the *Conference*. For instance, Victor Houlston has argued that Persons's book should not be read as a sedition-breeding endorsement of the Spanish Infanta, but rather as a 'first step towards a Catholic policy on the succession', which had less to do with political plots and schemes than with the Jesuits' idea of apostolate that implied the necessity of educating Catholics to take responsibility for the political and religious context in which they acted.⁷

In this article I would like to recover the more strictly political dimension of Persons's work. The *Conference*, I argue, was a text with a sharp political edge to be understood not simply in the context of the English or even British debates over the succession, but within a wider European network, both political and theoretical, at the centre of which was the Roman Curia. Taking this political aspect into account, however, does not mean denying the text's religious and apostolic functions; rather, by understanding the political functions of Persons's book, the theoretical and theological aims of the book's author and of its audience become clearer. Unfolding the many layers of Persons's text with respect to the heart of European Catholicism thus allows us to obtain a more detailed picture of the complexity of the relationship between English Catholicism and the political and religious history of Continental Europe.

I

We may start with an interesting off-shoot of Persons's *Conference*, a Latin version of the text that appeared in Rome in 1596,⁸ which was not simply a translation of the English book, but contained many important modifications. Most notably, the first part of the text, discussing the contractual nature of government, was not translated but simply summarized, because of the 'tanta temporis brevitatis', as the translator declares in the dedicatory epistle to the reader.⁹ Instead of a translation

⁶ See P. Holmes, *Resistance and compromise: the political thought of the Elizabethan Catholics* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 146–75; P. Lake, 'The king (the queen) and the Jesuit: James Stuart's *True law of free monarchies* in context/s', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 14 (2004), pp. 243–60 (quotation at p. 259).

⁷ Houlston, 'The hare and the drum', at p. 240. Houlston's take on Persons's *Conference* should be put in context of the reappraisal of the relationship between political activities and religious enterprise in the first mission of the Society of Jesus in England; see T. M. McCoog in his *The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland and England, 1541–1588: 'Our way of Proceeding'?* (Leiden, 1966).

⁸ The Latin translation is entitled *De regiae successionis apud Anglos iure libri duo*, and can be found in Archivio Segreto Vaticano (ASV), Borghese IV, 103. The text is anonymous, but it is clear that the translation was undertaken either by Persons himself or under his close supervision, since Persons presented the Latin book himself to Pope Clement VIII (more details on this in Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception', pp. 423–4).

⁹ *De regiae successionis*, fo. 3r.

of the first part, there is a summary of the argument in three main points. First, the translator writes that the author demonstrated that

even if sovereignty itself and the administration of the commonwealth is of natural and divine law ... nevertheless this or that method of government and administration of a commonwealth, such as monarchy, democracy, oligarchy or any particular form of government, is not of natural or divine law ... but it comes from the will and institution of every commonwealth.¹⁰

Hence this means that the laws of succession also depend on the ‘will and institution’ of the commonwealth and are not of divine or natural law. Secondly, the author proved that ‘the kings are subject to the laws’, meaning that ‘if they consistently deflect from the established aim, the commonwealth can ask them to render account, and if the mistakes are grave and dangerous, it can punish them’.¹¹ Thirdly, to confirm the previous point, the author adduced a variety of examples of oaths and coronation formulae with which the princes ‘tie themselves most strongly to maintain the pact with the commonwealth’ with the clause that ‘they will lose every right to the command if they violate their promises’.¹² After this brief summary, the translator moved to the second part of the treatise, which also contains some surprises. Apart from re-organizing chapters, a new chapter is added, in which the pope is included to the list of possible contenders to the English throne.¹³ In his prefatory epistle, the book’s translator indicated that the author had originally omitted that chapter in the English edition ‘to avoid hatred’ and to avoid stirring away people from the book ‘for fear’.¹⁴ Evidently such a danger was not to be feared for the Latin edition, pitched at a Roman audience.

The chapter presents two grounds on the basis of which the pope could have been said to possess some rights over the English crown. The first is the theory of the *potestas indirecta*, that is, that the Roman popes can dispose of temporal matters not ‘because of the strength of their ecclesiastical office and dignity, or because the Popes by Christ’s ordination are the lords of all empires’, but on the grounds that if every commonwealth’s ultimate end is to lead men to the eternal life, the pope, to whom such an end is directly committed, can indirectly intervene in temporal matters when a temporal sovereign acts to hinder the attainment of

¹⁰ ‘quamquam ipse principatus atque reipublicae administratio a iure sit naturae atque divino ... Haec tamen vel illa reipublicae gubernandae atque administrandae ratio, ut monarchia exempli causa, democratia, olygarchia, vel alia quaevis istius modi particularis regendi forma, non est a natura aut iure divino ... sed a unusque reipublicae voluntate atque instituto’, *ibid.*, fos. 5v–6r.

¹¹ ‘reges ipsos legibus subiectos esse ... Unde etiam sit consequens, ut si ab instituto fine contumaciter deflexerint, potest respublica rationem ab eis exigere, errataque si gravia atque periculosa sint, castigare’, *ibid.*, fo. 6v.

¹² ‘se ad pacta cum republica conservanda conceptis verbis efficacissime astringunt ... omni se principatus iure casuros, si promissa violant’, *ibid.*

¹³ This is chapter twelve, entitled ‘De iure Pontificum Romanorum in regnum Angliae atque Hyberniae, quodnam et ex quo tempore, et quibus de causis id ortum sit’, at fos. 124r–40v.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, fo. 4v.

such an end.¹⁵ In the specific case of England, since matters around the succession were so uncertain, the pontiff's authority could be not only useful, but also necessary 'ad res temperandas'.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the second ground stems 'from the nature of the feud or the pact once stipulated between the Roman Pontiffs and the kings of England'.¹⁷ In other words, the pope has some rights over England not only in general, by virtue of his special spiritual authority, but also because kings of England have long been vassals of the pope. More specifically, according to authors including Jean Bodin, who, the translator concedes, was not otherwise overly keen on defending the pope's authority, English kings were vassals of the popes since 1212, when King John declared himself as such and promised 4,000 *aurei* a year as a tribute to the Holy See.¹⁸ According to various authorities, this formal subjection of England to the pope could be dated as starting from the beginning of the eighth century, at the time of King Ina. In either case, it was historically correct to assert that such vassalage existed, and although the fact that the English king was vassal to the pope did not mean that the English realm was subject to Rome, it certainly meant that the pope had an increased authority to intervene in succession to compose and end quarrels, to avoid bloody wars between the parties involved, and to protect the commonwealth.¹⁹

Peter Holmes has explained such textual changes on the basis of the Roman audience of the Latin edition, or, as he puts it, because the text was adapted 'for papal consumption'.²⁰ However, one needs to distinguish between two different sets of Roman audience that Persons aimed to please. The first set relates to political theory, and especially to the question of the origin of sovereignty and that of the papal authority in temporal matters.

Persons's account of the origin and nature of government at the beginning of his English *Conference* was in line with the neo-Thomist account of government deriving from divine law. Briefly, for theologians of the School of Salamanca and Jesuit followers such as Suárez and Bellarmine, the argument that government derived from the law of God was directly aimed at refuting Protestants' claim that it derived instead from God's grace, which underpinned Calvinist and Huguenot theories that legitimized resistance against princes who did not seem to act according to God's grace. For Catholic theologians, on the contrary, authority (and obedience) did not depend on the sovereign's being in the grace of God, and therefore even laws made by pagan or heretical sovereigns – provided that they did not affect matters of religion – were binding in conscience. That did not mean, however, that one should tolerate a heretical king: even though his temporal authority could not be undermined by his heresy, the pope could

¹⁵ 'ex vi officii atque dignitatis suae ecclesiasticae, atque ordinatione Christi imperiorum omnium Domini sint', *ibid.*, fo. 125r–v. ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, fo. 129r.

¹⁷ 'ex natura feudi seu fiduciae contractae olim inter Pontifices Romanos et reges Angliae', *ibid.*, fo. 129v. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, fos. 130r–1r. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, fo. 140v.

²⁰ Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception', p. 424.

nevertheless use his *spiritual* supremacy to depose the king and allow his subjects to safeguard profession of the true faith.²¹

Persons, however, did not pursue the neo-Thomist argument to the papal supremacy, and after declaring that the origin of government resided in the law of God and nature, he introduced an argument for resistance that explicitly allowed individual subjects to rebel against a heretical sovereign. In fact, at the end of the first part of the English *Conference*, when discussing religion as the most important motive to resist a king or to overthrow the dynastic principle in choosing one, quoting St Paul's 'omne autem quod non est ex fide peccatum est', Persons made temporal obedience to a sovereign contingent upon the prince following the true religion and accorded every individual subject the right and duty to withdraw such obedience to a prince 'whom he iudgeth or beleveth to be faultie in religion'.²²

Polemically, Persons's use of such arguments in the English *Conference* was intended to embrace certain elements of the quasi-secular Protestant resistance theories and to re-calibrate them *ad usum* of the English Catholic community.²³ If the Jesuit wanted his text to appeal to a Roman audience, however, this section on the individual's right and duty of considering the sovereign's religion as a factor in making political decisions had to be corrected; indeed in the Latin summary of the first part of the book, the issue of the individual's support for a sovereign being contingent upon the prince's professing the true religion is quickly glossed over. At the same time, the theme of papal authority needed to be introduced, which Persons achieved by strongly endorsing the doctrine of the *potestas indirecta*, according to which the pope, while not exercising direct temporal authority, could nevertheless intervene indirectly in temporal matters by virtue of his supreme spiritual authority; and by denying the competing Catholic doctrine of the *potestas directa*, which granted the pope supreme authority in both temporal and spiritual matters.²⁴

This, again, demonstrates Persons's sensibility in understanding the internal equilibrium within the Roman Curia, at a time when the main supporter of the indirect power of the pope in temporal matters, the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine, was establishing himself as the leading theologian in Rome during the 1590s. After a

²¹ For a general introduction on these themes see Q. Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), II, pp. 135 and ff.

²² *A conference*, pp. 216–17.

²³ On Persons's relationship with French political theorists, both Catholic and Protestant, see J. H. M. Salmon, 'Catholic resistance theory, Ultramontanism, and the royalist response, 1580–1620', in J. H. Burns and M. Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 2004 (1st edn 1991)), pp. 219–53, at pp. 242–4; L. Parmelee, *Good news from Fraunce: anti-League propaganda in late Elizabethan England* (Rochester, NY, 1996). On the significance of Persons's polemical use of Huguenot arguments see Lake, 'The king (the queen) and the Jesuit'; S. Tutino, 'Jesuits, Huguenots, tyrants: notes on the *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* in early modern England', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 14 (2007), pp. 175–96.

²⁴ When explaining that the popes' authority is only indirect, the author of the Latin translation wrote that those canonists who believe in the direct authority of the pope in temporal matters do so 'invidiose magis quam vere atque solide': see *De regiae successionsis*, fo. 125v.

period in which his doctrine of the indirect power of the popes in temporal matters was heavily criticized by Pope Sixtus V,²⁵ Bellarmine's intellectual and political prestige was enhanced in Rome under Clement VIII. During the 1590s, Bellarmine occupied an increasingly pivotal role in the Congregations of the Inquisition and Index, became Clement VIII's main theological adviser in delicate theological questions such as the controversy *de auxiliis* over the Jesuit Luis de Molina's Pelagian-sounding doctrine of grace and free will, and was appointed cardinal in 1599.²⁶ In strongly endorsing Bellarmine's theory, Persons thus acknowledged Bellarmine as one of his most influential contacts in Rome. Indeed, correspondence between Persons and Bellarmine became increasingly frequent at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially during the controversy over the Oath of Allegiance, when Bellarmine drew on Persons's knowledge of English affairs to contextualize his theoretical stances against the Oath.²⁷

II

When Persons introduced the issue of papal authority, however, he moved beyond the theoretical level, to make a concrete case for the political role that the pope could, and should, play in English politics, at a time when a real plot was being devised to reinforce the papacy's potential influence in the succession, protect the English Catholic community, and eventually bring about the conversion of the English realm to Catholicism. The protagonists of this plot were Robert Persons; Joseph Creswell, an English Jesuit who had served as chaplain to the duke of Parma's army in Flanders in 1588, and who later succeeded Persons as rector of the English College in Rome;²⁸ and Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini, nephew of Pope Clement VIII (Ippolito Aldobrandini), who was appointed as secretary of state in 1592 and therefore in charge of the foreign policy of the Holy See.²⁹

²⁵ Sixtus V proposed to include the first volume of Bellarmine's *Controversiae*, in which the Jesuit had first proposed his theory of the papal indirect power, in the Index of Prohibited Books and only the pope's death in 1590 saved the work from being censured: on this see X. M. Le Bachelet, 'Bellarmine a l'Index', *Études*, 111 (1907), pp. 227–46.

²⁶ See, among others, P. Godman, *The saint as censor: Robert Bellarmine between Inquisition and Index* (Leiden, 2000); and F. Motta, *Bellarmino: una teologia politica della Controriforma* (Brescia, 2005).

²⁷ I plan to develop this theme elsewhere, but a significant sample of letters between the English Jesuit and the cardinal can be found in Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede, St St SS 1–b and St St SS 1–c.

²⁸ On Creswell's biography see A. F. Allison, 'The later life and writings of Joseph Creswell, S. J. (1556–1623)', *Recusant History*, 15 (1979–81), pp. 79–144; A. J. Loomie, *The Spanish Elizabethans: The English exiles at the court of Philip II* (New York, NY, 1963); idem, ed., *English polemics at the Spanish court: Joseph Creswell's 'Letter to the ambassador from England'* (New York, NY, 1993), and also Loomie's entry on Creswell in the *Dictionary of national biography* (DNB).

²⁹ See Elena Fasano's entry on Pietro Aldobrandini in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome, 1960–).

In 1592, Persons had called Creswell to Spain to help seek funds for the Jesuit colleges at Valladolid and Seville.³⁰ Creswell was also put in charge of establishing personal contacts with the Spanish court, where Creswell's collaborator, Robert Persons, had been involved in a delicate international matter. A particularly tense political atmosphere prevailed in Madrid, regarding the affairs of English Catholics, as the so-called 'Spanish Blanks' plot peaked and suddenly ended in 1592. This was a plot orchestrated by Scots Catholic noblemen, including the earls of Erroll, Huntly, and Angus, who tried to win support from Philip II to invade England, dethrone Elizabeth, and install a Catholic ruler, and simultaneously invade Scotland to change the religion there, with or without James VI's help. The affair was co-ordinated by a Scots Jesuit, William Crichton, who was in Madrid from 1590 to 1592 to secure Philip's help, and it ended in December 1592, when one of the conspirators, George Kerr, was arrested in Scotland and found in possession of 'blank' letters (hence the name of the plot), signed by the Scots earls, to be given to Philip as pledges of their support in exchange for his sending troops for the planned invasion. The details of the plot and its immediate context, that is, in the immediate aftermath of the Armada and at a delicate time in the diplomatic relationship between Elizabeth and James, has already been discussed by T. G. Law and others.³¹ Here I would like to draw attention to the division within the Catholic leaders in Madrid over the plot: Crichton's plan, in fact, did not win support from Persons.

It was Crichton himself who, writing to Claudio Acquaviva, the general of the Society of Jesus, in April 1592, complained that 'Persons remains convinced that the enterprise of the Scottish band must not be started'. For Crichton, Persons's opposition had two disadvantages: first, it 'made the enterprise more difficult'; second, it increased suspicion among the Scots that Persons actually wanted an English Catholic ruler, thus undermining both Scottish and Spanish interests in the affair. As a result, Crichton advised Acquaviva to lobby with William Allen, who had been a close collaborator of Persons in the 1580s and 1590s, after being appointed as cardinal, and was also a member of the Congregation of the Index in Rome, to 'mitigate this opinion of Father Persons whose decision here and in England weighs more than anybody else's, and yet he can be mistaken'.³²

³⁰ On Creswell's early years in Spain see Loomie, *The Spanish Elizabethans*, pp. 182–229.

³¹ See M. A. S. Hume, *Treason and plot: struggles for Catholic supremacy in the last years of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1901), pp. 23 and ff; T. G. Law, 'The Spanish Blanks and Catholic earls, 1592–1594', in P. Hume Brown, ed., *Collected essays and reviews of Thomas Graves Law, LL.D.* (Edinburgh, 1904), pp. 244–76; F. Borja de Medina, 'Intrigues of a Scottish Jesuit at the Spanish court: unpublished letters of William Crichton to Claudio Aquaviva (Madrid 1590–1592)', in T. M. McCoog, ed., *The reckoned expense: Edmund Campion and the early English Jesuits* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp. 215–45.

³² 'P. Personio ... sta sempre saldo che non si habbi de far principio dell'Impresa della banda de Scotia ... V.P.R. potrà trattar coll' Illm. mo Cardinal d'Inghilterra per mitigar questa opinione del padre Parsonio il cui voto pesa più qui et in quella natione che de tutti gli altri, et pur si può ingannarsi', Crichton to Aquaviva, Madrid, 7 Apr. 1595, published by Borja de Medina in 'Intrigues', pp. 238–9.

In the summer of 1592, Crichton wrote again to Acquaviva, reporting that he visited Persons in Valladolid where they had reached some form of agreement, but 'regarding the main affair, because of other considerations, there is nothing to be done now'.³³ Persons's strategy then was to delay the affair by taking advantage of Philip's indecision, whilst he let Crichton leave Spain – during the summer of 1592 – welcomed Creswell, left him in charge of the Anglo-Spanish affairs in Madrid, and moved to Valladolid in order to take care of the newly founded Jesuit seminary. The discovery of the plot in December ended the affair of the Spanish Blanks.

Between 1593 and 1595 a 'paradoxical' change developed, according to the editor of Crichton's correspondence, Francisco Borja de Medina.³⁴ Crichton moved to Flanders, where he changed his mind about James: the king of Scotland was not a bad candidate for the succession after all, for 'his right [to reign over England] is as clear as that of his mother' and 'we could win this king' to the Catholic cause, provided that, from Rome, a series of actions be taken to convert James to his mother's religion.³⁵ Meanwhile, Creswell, on behalf of Persons who had left the court, resumed negotiations for a political and military solution to the problems of the English Catholics and requested help from the same Scots earls whom Persons had refused to support a few months earlier and who had meanwhile managed to avoid receiving harsh punishments from James.³⁶ For Persons to have resumed those Scottish connections, I argue, was not paradoxical, but part of a larger strategy of which Persons's *Conference* was a component.

III

To understand this turn of events, we need to examine the correspondence among Persons, Creswell, and Aldobrandini, the last supposedly being the Roman 'leg' of the plan. In March 1594, Creswell had contacted Aldobrandini, emphasizing the importance of supporting the seminaries as necessary in maintaining Catholicism in England for 'more than 30 years'. Supporting the seminaries, Creswell wrote, was even more necessary now, as 'with every probability this tragedy must end with the death of the Queen, and even earlier, if there was a person who could withstand the heretics'. As Creswell perceived, the English Catholics had not taken any action themselves 'because they were waiting for some help from abroad, and if those who should have done it had given such help to them, the Christian commonwealth would not be in such strain today'.³⁷

³³ 'questi di passati fui a Valladolid per conferir col Padre Personio, et siamo stati molto conformi nel medesimo parer ... Nel negotio principale per altre occupationi non si può far altro per adesso', Crichton to Acquaviva, 18 July 1592, in *ibid.*, p. 240.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

³⁵ 'il diritto del Re de Scotia è chiaro come quello de sua madre ... tengo per certo che si può guadagnar questo Re', Crichton to Acquaviva, Brussels, 13 Jan. 1594, in *ibid.*, pp. 244–5.

³⁶ See Law, 'The Spanish Blanks', pp. 272–4.

³⁷ 'che con ogni probabilità si ha de finire questa tragedia colla morte della Regina, et piu presto, se vi fusse persona che facesse testa alli heretici, nissuno delli Catholici dentro il Regno lo ha fatto questi

Creswell developed this hint as to other alternatives to conversion in England, aside from the founding and maintaining of seminars. A year later, he wrote to Aldobrandini again, alerting him that

from England and Scotland these days several people have come to deal with His Majesty about some affairs relating to the conversion of those realms with different means. We are in charge of those spiritual means, which so far have been successful and they will be more and more successful with His Holiness's and Your Excellency's favour.³⁸

Intrigued, Aldobrandini asked Creswell for more information, and, two months later, Creswell updated the Roman prelate. Those who had come to Spain, the Jesuit informed the cardinal, were Hugh Barclay of Ladyland and John Cecil,³⁹ agents of the earls of Erroll, Huntly, and Angus, who were trying to convince the Spanish king, Persons, and Creswell to 'give the help that was supposed to be granted to the king of Scotland in case he wished to support the Catholics, to these earls instead', for Erroll and Angus, their agents affirmed, were more likely to achieve 'what His Holiness wants, that is the conversion of the kingdom of Scotland and the beginning of the conversion of the kingdom of England'. This opportunity should not be missed.⁴⁰

What Persons and Creswell were now trying to do, however, was not to strike the same deal that Crichton a few years back had attempted: rather, the Jesuits envisaged a different strategy that the Roman Curia should have adapted to allow the Catholics to remove James VI, draw on the support from rebelling Scots Catholics and Philip II, without conceding too much to either the Scots or the Spaniards.

In autumn 1595, Creswell advised Aldobrandini to proceed cautiously in dealing with the Scots: 'the affair is of great importance, and we must set it right at the beginning so that from these sparks bigger flames might not arise'.⁴¹ For Creswell, this Scottish-Spanish plot was an important opportunity, and 'great opportunities to do good have already been lost, because of some people's tardiness and lack of resolution, and from small beginnings one could hope for

anni passati, per sperar soccorso da fuori, lo quale se gli havessero dato, chi lo dovevano dare, la Repubblica Christiana non staria hoggidi in tante angustie', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 12 Mar. 1594, ASV, Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 62v.

³⁸ 'De Inghilterra et Scotia hanno venuti diversi questi giorni, per trattare con S.M.tà alcuni negotii toccanti alla conversione di quelli Regni per altri mezzi. A noi altri toccano questi mezzi spirituali, che fin adesso hanno havuto successo, et più haveranno ogni giorno col favore de S.S.tà et de V.S.III.ma', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 25 Mar. 1595, *ibid.*, fo. 63r.

³⁹ John Cecil was a Catholic priest and a double agent and Hugh Barclay was a Scots nobleman implicated in the Hispano-Scottish plans of the 1590s: on Cecil see *DNB*, and Ladyland and his role in the plot see Hume, *Treason and plot*, pp. 72 and ff.

⁴⁰ 'che il soccorso che fu servito concedere al Re di Scotia in caso volesse favorire alli Catolici, sia concesso a questi signori, poi che per questa via si effettuarà meglio lo che S.S.tà pretende che è la conversione del Regno de Scotia et principio a la de Inghilterra', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 31 May 1595, ASV Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 65r-v at fo. 65r.

⁴¹ 'il negotio è de molto momento, et bisogna rimediario nelli principii accioché de queste schintille non nascano maggiori fiamme', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 21 Sept. 1595, *ibid.*, fo. 75r.

great outcomes, provided that there is the inclination'.⁴² In other words, Philip must be convinced to intervene in favour of the Catholic cause, and aiding the Scots rebels was a good start. If the pope wanted to have a leading role in the enterprise, however, Creswell advised against giving his support to the earls too quickly:

if anybody claims that it is expedient to nominate a leader among the Scots Catholics in order to raise somebody more than his title would allow for, Your Excellency should not allow this advice to be followed, for it will be the destruction of the cause, as we saw it happened in France. Afterwards, at the right time, we could do it, but it is not expedient to do it now and neither is it expedient to do it without the consent of the Catholics themselves, and it is not expedient now to excommunicate the King. Time will tell what we must do afterwards.⁴³

Thus in 1595, just as in 1592, Persons and Creswell did not wish the Catholics to align themselves completely with the Scots rebels, since this was not in the best interests of either the English Catholics or the Roman Curia, which had already experienced the drawbacks of supporting too warmly the French Catholic League against Henry of Navarre. Rather, Aldobrandini (and the English Catholics) should carve a niche for their political interests by taking advantage of the occasion offered by the Scots.

The outline of an alternative Catholic strategy was set out in another letter, written in cipher by Creswell to Aldobrandini in December 1595. Creswell began by indicating that it was certain that 'in order to establish the Catholic religion in England a Catholic king is necessary'.⁴⁴ Various candidates were proposed, including the king of Spain, the Infanta, and the duke of Parma, although what the Catholics really needed was not so much a Spanish king, as Spanish intervention in support of a Catholic candidate ('neither the King of Spain nor the English Catholics want to make the King of Spain King of England, but rather another Catholic').⁴⁵ The most dangerous candidate, however, remained James VI, whom Catholics should oppose because 'he is a heretic' and because his election could change the political equilibrium of Europe: 'it is not convenient either for England or for Scotland and even less for the Apostolic See and religion to appoint one King for the entire island for the most serious reasons that

⁴² 'grandi occasioni si sono perse de fare bene, per la tardanza et irresoluzione de alcuni, et de piccoli principii si potrebbe sperare grande effetto, supposta la dispositione', *ibid.*

⁴³ 'se alcuno vorràpretendere che conviene nominare capo tra li Catholici de Scotia per alzare qualcuno più che per il grado della sua noblezza gli tocca, V.S.III.ma non permetta che gli si dia orecchio, perché sarà la destruzione della causa, come se ha visto in francia. Dipoi ai suoi tempi si potrà fare, però non conviene al presente, ne in nessun tempo senza il consenso degli stessi catholici, ne che si proceda alla escomunionne del Re per adesso. Lo che dipoi si ha da fare, il tempo insegnerà', *ibid.*

⁴⁴ 'Per stabilire la Religione Cat.ca in Inghilterra è necessario Cat.co Re d'Inghilterra' Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 22 Dec. 1595, *ibid.*, fos. 78r–79v at fo. 78r.

⁴⁵ 'ma né lui [the king of Spain] né loro [the English Catholics] pretendono di fare il Re di Spagna Re d'Inghilterra, ma altro Cat.co', *ibid.*

Your Excellency will understand: to every body its soul, and to every ship its pilot'.⁴⁶

By the end of 1595 Creswell's interest in the delicate political equilibrium in Europe was justified. In the aftermath of the Armada's defeat, Philip II was temporizing and oscillating between war and peace with England, whilst also waiting to see how events turned out in France, where, in 1595, Henry of Navarre had been pardoned by Pope Clement VIII who had thus legitimized Henry's right to the French throne.⁴⁷ Accordingly, Creswell suggested that the Roman See should aim to prevent a new powerful Protestant king on the European scene. Indeed, the same doubts about a Scots king on the English throne were anticipated by Persons in 1592, at the time of Crichton's negotiation with the earls, and similar concerns regarding changes to the Continental equilibrium, via the unification of Scotland and England under a Scots king, were to be voiced by Robert Persons in his English *Conference*.⁴⁸

According to Creswell, the Roman Church should also, however, be wary of 'internal' risks involved in supporting the Scots rebels, that could create a serious and dangerous breach within Catholicism. In Flanders, for example, there were many Catholics, including William Gifford, Charles Paget, and William Crichton, who were suspicious of direct Spanish intervention against the English or Scottish crown, supported James in the debate over Elizabeth's successor, and were trying to lobby the Nuncio to betray the rebels.⁴⁹ The best strategy for the Roman Curia was therefore to keep its options open, whilst keeping an eye both on Flanders and on James's possible supporters whilst also gathering information from the 'secure Catholics ... who do not seek their personal interests but the common good'. Time will make clear 'qui querunt sua et Iesum Christum'.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ 'non conviene ne per Inghilterra ne per Scotia et molto manco per la Sede Apostolica et Religione far un Re di tutta l'isola per gravissime cause che V.S.III.ma intenderà ogni corpo la sua anima, et ogni nave il suo piloto', *ibid.*

⁴⁷ For a general outlook on Philip II's foreign policy in the 1590s see H. Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (New Haven and London 1997), pp. 301 and ff; and G. Parker, *The grand strategy of Philip II* (New Haven, CT, and London 1998), pp. 275 and ff.

⁴⁸ *A conference*, pp. 118–23 *passim*.

⁴⁹ Indeed, Paget, Gifford, and Crichton will be highly critical not only of Persons's political activities, but also of the content of the *Conference*: see Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception', pp. 418–19, and *supra*, n. 2. At the end of 1595 Persons complained to Acquaviva that many people were reporting from Flanders that Crichton showed 'disgust for the things made here ... and he shows himself of the party of Paget and other opponents' ('de su desgusto notorio contra las cosas de aca escriven mucho ... y se muestra mucho del bando de pagetto y otros contenditores', Persons to Aquaviva, Madrid, 9 Dec. 1595, ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico 651/640, document n. 31, unfol.), and in the spring of 1596 Persons wrote directly to Crichton to attack Crichton's faith in the conversion of James and thus his support to his candidacy for the succession (Persons to Crichton, Hispali 10 May 1596, ARSI, Fondo Gesuitico 651/640, document n. 32, fos. 148r–149v).

⁵⁰ 'informasi da Cat.ci securi, et senza emulatione, et da quelli che cercano non li suoi interessi particolari, se non il ben publico', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 22 Dec. 1595, ASV Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 78v.

Meanwhile, so long as there was no certainty regarding a possible candidate, it was even more necessary to keep encouraging Spain to support the English Catholics:

it is greatly important that the English situation be remedied while the King of Spain is alive, since his intention is pious and good, without a doubt he will maintain the promise made, we do not know yet who the person will be (apart from the fact that he will give a great demonstration of virtue and religion) or what kind of support he will have, therefore it is convenient that His Holiness encourage His Majesty, as the less personal interest people can have, the more spiritual reasons they need.⁵¹

Creswell thus advised the Roman Church to refrain from naming an 'official' candidate, to try to oppose James and to maintain Philip II's interest even without a clear answer on the next successor. An integral part of this strategy, the Jesuit wrote, was

an English book written on this issue without passion, only showing what everybody could say by himself and leaving to the reader the free choice, and such book was a very necessary effort to oppose the tradition of English and Scottish heresies, which are being re-proposed in order to find any means possible to destroy what they see the Catholic want.⁵²

Another benefit of such a book would be that, by showing that the succession was in fact open, it effectively refuted the propaganda of those heretics who sought to portray the Catholics as supporting a foreigner to the English throne, without talking too explicitly about the actual relationship between the English Catholics and Spain.⁵³

It is thus argued that the book to which Creswell was referring was Persons's *Conference*, and that the strategy he proposed to Aldobrandini forms the background to the 1596 Latin translation of the text. The aim of this translation was precisely that of furnishing a theoretical and political backbone for this plan, by revising and finessing problematic or ambiguous points in the English version. The plan involved three main objectives: first, to keep the Spanish king interested in supporting the Catholic cause without making too many promises regarding

⁵¹ 'Importa grandemente che si rimedii a Inghilterra in vita del Re di Spagna, per che la sua intentione et Santa et buona et non sara dubio che non guardi la sua promessa offerta, non sappiamo ancora chi sarà (ben che dia gran demonstratione di virtu e di Religione) hor che consenso haverà, per cio conviene che Sua S.tà animi Sua M.tà per che quando manes [menos] pretendono gli huomini del particular interesse tanto più bisogno hanno de motivi spirituali', *ibid.*, fo. 79r.

⁵² 'da poco se ha scritto il libro Inglese sopra questo con ogni indifferenza solo manifestando cio che ognuno puo dire per se stesso lasciando la determinatione libera al lettore, et fu travaglio molto necessario per ovviare a traditione di heresie inglese, et scozzese, che si sono resentite et buscano tutti i mezzi possibili di disfare quello che veggono li Cat.ci pretendere', *ibid.*, fo. 78r-v.

⁵³ '[the heretics] se servono delli pretesti suoi ordinarii per ingannare li più semplici et instigare li passionati et per questo hanno spie et secreti a mile in tutte le parti che ponno per dar da intendere che il Re di Spagna pretende acquistare Inghilterra, il che non è vero come bene lo sanno per persone a chi più di propinquo tocca et si potrebbe farlo manifesto al mondo, se non convenisse trattare con secreto per rispetto delli heretici', *ibid.*, fo. 78v.

the succession. Secondly, to take advantage of the Scots earls to strengthen the anti-James party among Catholics, many of whom were supporters of James, without actually promising the throne to any of the earls. Thirdly, by keeping options for the succession open, to give Rome a pre-eminent leadership in the affair.

And this is exactly what the Latin *Conference* does. Just like the English version, the Latin also is intended, as the preface makes clear, simply to argue that the matter of the succession should ‘be discussed peacefully, only with arguments and reasons without harm and prejudice towards everybody’. For this reason, the strengths and weaknesses of each possible candidate were simply discussed, and the author avoided supporting any particular one.⁵⁴ In addition, the Latin *Conference* avoided dangerous calls to resistance, while vigorously reinforcing the pope’s role, both theoretical and political, in English affairs, and especially regarding the succession.

IV

At the beginning of 1596 this plan seemed to be working. In February, another letter in cipher reached Aldobrandini from Madrid, supplying more details such as the amount of money and troops required from Spain by the Scots nobles. The suggestion that Rome should avoid aligning itself completely with the rebels, however, remains: ‘whatever His Holiness will want to do in this affair ... it is expedient that this be done either from Italy or through Spain to give it a start’. Once again, no preference on the part of the pope should be given to any one of the Scots earls in particular:

if somebody wishes to make the Earl of Angus the head of the Catholic cause in Scotland Your Excellency should not give his consent, because the suspicion alone of such thing would be the ruin of the cause. Afterwards, at the appropriate time, we could nominate one, but it must happen through the election of the Catholics themselves, and more probably they will elect Erroll. The first thing to do is to strengthen these factions as quickly as possible, and to keep communicating with the other factions, and to maintain the leadership of the affair.⁵⁵

Thus, on the one hand the plan proceeded smoothly: logistical details were coming together, the Roman Curia appeared supportive and Persons’s translation was being undertaken. On the other hand, however, the international

⁵⁴ ‘id nunc pacifice atque citra omnium iacturam, aut preiudicium argumentis tantum atque rationibus discuteretur’, *De regiae successionis*, fo. 4r.

⁵⁵ ‘Quello che S.S.tà sarà servito di fare in questo negotio, conviene..o diretto da Italia, o per via di Spagna per dare il principio ... se alcuno pretendesse fare il Conde di Angos capo della causa Cat.ca in Scotia V.S.Ill.ma non lo admetta perché la sola suspicione de queste sarebbe ruina della causa. Adesso di poi alli suoi tempi se potrà fare uno, però ha d’esser per eletteone delli stessi Cat.ci e più facilmente faranno general il Conde de Herol. La prima cosa ha d’esser fortificandoli dette parti, et con la prestezza possibile, et de li tener corrispondenza con tutte le altre parti, et governar il negotio’, Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 14 Feb. 1596, in ASV Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 89r–v at fo. 89v.

scene became increasingly fraught: in the summer of 1596 Philip II's fleet was defeated at Cadiz by a joint Anglo-Dutch fleet, whilst his plan for a 'definitive' naval attack on England, the so-called 'Second Armada', failed the following winter, and again in the late summer and early autumn of 1597. Meanwhile, the outcome of the Franco-Spanish war remained uncertain: while Philip II increasingly tried to disengage himself from the war, the Spanish army kept fighting the French in Calais and Amiens.⁵⁶ In England, the matter of Elizabeth's succession was hotly debated, and Catholic plans to ensure a Catholic successor were not ignored.⁵⁷ Among Catholics two notable events also occurred. The first was known as the 'Wisbech Stirs' and arose in 1595 as a quarrel among recusants confined in the prison of Wisbech, when some Jesuits attempted to impose new rules of conduct on the rest of the prisoners, which were opposed by some secular clergy, also prisoners in Wisbech. The second, much more important, controversy also saw Jesuits pitched against secular clergy, this time over the appointment of George Blackwell as archpriest for England in 1598. The Jesuits had vigorously supported Blackwell's appointment, while the secular clergy opposed what they saw as a means for the Jesuits to extend their influence over the English clergy.⁵⁸ Both episodes reflected profound divisions within the Catholic camp between Jesuits and secular clergy, which made it even more difficult for Persons to establish the pre-eminence of his faction and to impose his political strategy at the end of the 1590s. Aldobrandini and the Roman Curia likewise wanted to withdraw from the plan until the international situation was clearly resolved, as to continue promoting a Spanish intervention in England or Scotland was both unreasonable and inappropriate. Consequently, no further letters on the Scottish rebellion and Catholic plans were sent from Madrid to Rome in 1596.⁵⁹

In 1597, Creswell tried to contact Aldobrandini again, adopting a different tone. He apologized for his long silence, which did not derive from a 'lack of love and respect', but to the fact that Aldobrandini had never replied to Creswell's last letter, which had been sent almost a year earlier.⁶⁰ He had also heard that

⁵⁶ On Philip's foreign policy in these years see *supra*, n. 47.

⁵⁷ See N. Tyacke, 'Puritan politicians and King James VI and I, 1587–1604', in T. Cogswell, R. Cust, and P. Lake, eds., *Politics, religion and popularity in early Stuart Britain* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 21–44.

⁵⁸ On the Wisbech Stirs and the Archpriest Controversy and their impact in the English Catholic community see, among others, T. G. Law, *A historical sketch of the conflicts between Jesuits and seculars in the reign of Queen Elizabeth with a reprint of Christopher Bagshaw's 'True relation of the faction begun at Wisbich' and illustrative documents* (London, 1889); *idem*, *The Archpriest Controversy* (London, 1896–8); J. H. Pollen, *The Institution of the Archpriest Blackwell* (London, 1916); P. Renold, 'The Wisbech Stirs', *Catholic Record Society* (1958); J. Bossy, *The English Catholic community* (London, 1975), pp. 35 and ff; A. Pritchard, *Catholic loyalism in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979), pp. 80 and ff; Holmes, *Resistance and Compromise*, pp. 186–204.

⁵⁹ The only two letters from Creswell to Aldobrandini that can be found in this folder after the letter sent on 14 February discuss only the disorders and dissent within the seminaries (Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 24 Feb. 1596, ASV, Borghese III 124 g. 2, fos. 89r–90v; and *idem* to the same, Madrid, 16 Apr. 1596, *ibid.*, fo. 94r–v).

⁶⁰ 'il mio lungo silenzio ha proceduto de mancamento alcuno de amore et rispetto, se non al contrario, aspettando una risposta de una scritta a 12 marzo del anno passato che dubito non sia stata

Aldobrandini had received calumnious reports concerning him, Persons, and Holt from enemies in Flanders, of which he promised to give Aldobrandini ‘all the satisfaction that you can wish for from a serious religious man and loyal servant and son of the Apostolic See, but I wish that Your Excellency give me more credit’.⁶¹

Aldobrandini’s reticence must have worried the Jesuits, and Persons made a last attempt to convince Rome not to abandon the plan. In July 1597, during the summer of the Second Armada, Persons wrote to Aldobrandini reminding him that ‘Your Excellency has in his hands the greatest affair of the Christian commonwealth in many centuries’, and it was not a time to abandon it.⁶² Persons showed the cardinal that he understood the difficulties arising from the possible peaceful resolution of the Franco-Spanish conflict, which might have jeopardized Philip’s intervention in England and Scotland. His solution was to include France in the plan: Persons wrote that ‘probably the difficulty to fear the most would come from that king [of France], even if the profits, in my opinion, will be equal, or rather greater, for his faction’.⁶³ Accordingly, Aldobrandini should dispatch a prudent man to ‘inform the legate of France in person, because it seems to me of great importance since it is impossible to write everything and one cannot answer the objections and difficulties through letters’.⁶⁴ At the same time, Persons advised, Spain could not be abandoned: ‘from the Spanish side his Holiness will not refrain from using all the diligence which will be necessary or appropriate’.⁶⁵

Between the end of 1597 and 1598, however, Persons’s strategy collapsed. The Roman Curia, which had hitherto avoided siding with either Spain or France, realized that Henry of Navarre was likely to succeed and therefore sided with France. In October 1597, Pope Clement VIII received French support when, on the death of the childless duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, he succeeded in conquering Ferrara and incorporating it in the papal territories in January 1598.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, secret Franco-Spanish negotiations were underway under Clement VIII’s

resa a V.S.Ill.ma poi che in tanti mesi non ho avuto nuova nissuna della ricevuta’, Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 23 Jan. 1597, in ASV Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 103r–v at fo. 103r. The letter mentioned by Creswell is not in this folder.

⁶¹ ‘tutta la satisfatione che può desiderare de huomo grave religioso et fedele servo et figliolo della Sede Apostolica ma voglio che V.S.Ill.ma mi dia più credito’, *ibid.*, fo. 103v.

⁶² ‘V.S. ha per le mani il maggior negotio che sea trattato della rep. christiana per molti secoli’, Persons to Aldobrandini, 12 July 1597, from the English College, *ibid.*, fos. 13r–14v at fo. 13r.

⁶³ ‘io fo istanza per questa diligenza in francia perche penso probabilmente che la maggior difficoltà s’habbia da temer da quella M.tà, benche li profitti saranno a mio giudicio eguali, o più presto maggiori da sua banda’, *ibid.*, fo. 13r–v.

⁶⁴ ‘mandar algun huomo efficace et prudente a informar il legato de Francia a bocca tanto più me pare che sarebbe di molta importanza poichè tutto no se può scrivere ni se può rispondere all’obiettoni et difficoltà per lettere’, *ibid.*, fo. 13v.

⁶⁵ ‘da parte di spagna anchora non lascerà sua S.tà di usar la diligenza che ne sarà necessaria o convenevole’, *ibid.*

⁶⁶ For an overview of the pro-Navarre faction in the Roman Curia see R. De Maio, ‘La Curia Romana nella riconciliazione di Enrico IV’, in *idem*, *Riforme e miti nella Chiesa del Cinquecento* (Naples, 1992), pp. 143–87.

aegis for a peace treaty, signed on 2 May 1598. The peace of Vervins effectively sealed Henry of Navarre's victory and Philip's defeat.⁶⁷

Creswell was aware that these last developments signalled the end of his plan. On 19 May 1598, he wrote to Aldobrandini offering his congratulations on the victory in Ferrara.⁶⁸ Regarding the state of English Catholics, he simply wished that God might assist them in 'bringing peace in the seminary in Rome, destroying the plots of the heretics which was ... to bring dissention'.⁶⁹ Evidently the outcome of the Franco-Spanish conflict and Rome's position encouraged Creswell to abandon high politics and instead concentrate on trying to heal the fast-growing dissent within the Catholic camp between Jesuits and secular clergy.

Persons also understood that his plan had failed, but immediately tried to make the best of the new situation: in a letter to Aldobrandini on 31 May 1598 he congratulated the cardinal and the pope for the 'felicissimo successo' in the peace of Vervins, a peace about which 'all those who desire the common good of Christianity have right reason to rejoice'.⁷⁰ But England should not be forgotten: indeed 'from the negotiations seen so far it could be possible to think that also the Queen of England can get in [the treaty]'. Accordingly, Persons asked Aldobrandini to lobby the French king to convince Elizabeth to enter the negotiations and to give some concessions to the English Catholics.⁷¹ Late that summer, Persons made the same request when he asked Aldobrandini

to see to it vigorously with His Holiness that the much vexed English Catholics be supported, if the Queen is to enter in the treaty (made by the grace of God and the authority of His Holiness between Spain and France) one should put a relevant clause in favour of the said Catholics, persecuted now more than ever.⁷²

⁶⁷ The most recent contributions on the peace of Vervins are the essays contained in C. Vidal and F. Pilleboue, eds., *La paix de Vervins, 1598* (Amiens, 1998).

⁶⁸ 'No puedo decir la opinion que ha cobrado con todos S.S.d por la resolucion en lo de ferrara y V.S.III.ma por la execucion', Creswell to Aldobrandini, Madrid, 19 May 1598, in ASV Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 105r-v.

⁶⁹ 'en lo que toca a las cosas de los Catolicos de Inglaterra ... Dios N.S. suplira y sin duda dara complida paga a su S.d y a V.S.III.ma por la perced hecha en apaciguar aquel seminario de Roma, deshazendo los disegnos de los herejes que era ... de poner discordia', *ibid.*, fo. 105r.

⁷⁰ 'questa pace che ... tutti che desiderano il bene pubblico della christianità hanno giusta causa de rallegrarsene infinitamente', Persons to Aldobrandini, Napoli, 31 May 1598, in *ibid.*, fo. 151r-v, at fo. 151r.

⁷¹ 'et poiché dalli trattai che fin qui si sono visti si puo pensare che la Regina anchora d'Inghilterra ha d'intrarvi ... ho preso ardire di tornare a ricordarselo a V.S.III.ma, supplicandola humilmente sia servita procurare che si faccino officii galiardi con la detta Regina per mezzo del re di Francia ... che le conditioni che vanno aprentate con questa o altre simili o almeno alcune d'esse si concedino alli catolici', *ibid.*, fo. 151r-v.

⁷² 'suplicando la S.V.III.ma con ogni istanza d'operarse caldamente con N.S. in favore dell'afflittissimi catolici d'Inghilterra, si la Regina viene a intrare in questa pace (fatta qui per la gratia di Dio et l'autorità di Sua S.tà fra Spagna et Francia) che vi si ponga algun articolo rilevante in favore delli detti Catolici perseguitati al presente più che mai', Persons to Aldobrandini, Napoli, 7 Aug. 1598, in *ibid.*, fos. 19r-20v, at fo. 19r-v.

V

This is the last letter from Persons to Aldobrandini raising the possibility of Elizabeth's participation in the peace treaty concessions being granted to English Catholics. As James's position became stronger, and he was increasingly recognized as Elizabeth's successor, the pope and Roman Curia tried to convert James to the Roman faith in the early years of his reign, or at least to convince him to grant a measure of toleration to English Catholics. Persons actively participated in this new strategy by trying to assimilate, once again, the interests of the English Catholics with those of the Roman Curia.

In May 1603, for instance, Persons wrote to the pope proposing ideas to convince James to support English Catholics.⁷³ An effective way of persuading the king would be to 'send somebody in secret, or with an excuse, as for instance that he wanted to see the celebrations for the coronation, or something like that. This person should be a knight or another person in disguise, with secret letters from Your Holiness to the King.'⁷⁴ Such letters should contain reasons ranging from a concern for universal peace in Europe (since toleration had been granted to French Calvinists and to German Lutherans, tolerating English Catholics 'will help much to maintain the universal peace among all the princes of Christendom')⁷⁵ to arguments of *realpolitik* and political convenience (the Catholics could be useful to James as 'a counterweight to the Puritans, a very dangerous sect').⁷⁶ In addition, Persons suggested, the pope could threaten James by drawing his attention to the fact that 'the Catholics are a very important part of his kingdom in England, Scotland and Ireland, and since they are united in religion with many neighbouring princes, there would be no reason to keep them unhappy and afflicted',⁷⁷ while reassuring him that 'the English Catholics suffered much for the King's mother'.⁷⁸ In the same year, Persons had the *Basilikon Doron* translated and sent to the pope, wishing that 'God might inspire His Majesty to implement in his government the good things said and written in this book, and to correct those in which because of his upbringing God so far has not given him enough clarity'.⁷⁹

⁷³ Persons to the pope, 30 May 1603, in *ibid.*, fos. 29r–30v.

⁷⁴ 'si mandasse qualch'uno in secreto, con qualch'altro pretesto, come sarebbe di vedere queste feste della coronatione, o altro simile, et che la persona fusse cavallero seculare o altra persona dissimulata, con lettere segrete di V.S.ta'al Re', *ibid.*, fo. 29v.

⁷⁵ 'aiutera a mantener pace universale con tutti li principi della Christianità', *ibid.*, fo. 30v.

⁷⁶ 'che essendo tre sorti di religioni nelli stati del Re, et ogni sorte con grande seguito, cio è Catolici protestanti et puritani, non sara poco contrapeso alli puritani (setta pericollissima)', *ibid.*

⁷⁷ 'Ch'essendo li Catolici una parte tanto importante delli suoi regni tanto l'Inglese quanto Scozzesi et Irlandesi, et uniti nella religione con tanti principi vicini, non sarebbe raggione tenerli scontenti et afflitti', *ibid.*, fo. 30r.

⁷⁸ 'Che questi medessimi Catolici Inglesi han patito molto per la madre del Re', *ibid.*

⁷⁹ 'che pregiamo Iddio (come facciamo) che ispiri a sua M.tà d'eseguir nel suo governo, le cose ben dette et scritte in questo libro, et correggere quelle, nelle quali per causa dell'educatione Iddio fin qui non gli ha dato bastante luce'. The manuscript of the Latin translation of the *Basilikon Doron* and Persons's accompanying letter can be found in ASV Borghese IV, 95, unfol.

At the same time as Persons was trying to convince James to grant toleration to Catholics, he actively pursued strategies to oppose the king in case he refused to show leniency towards the Catholics. In the summer of 1603, Persons wrote to Cardinal Borghese alerting him that the *True lawe of free monarchies*, already published in Scotland, had now been published in England.⁸⁰ This book was deemed dangerous because, among other things, it claimed that the king was not subject to any law but was 'dominus absolutus omnium', and that 'in the coronation [the king] must swear to maintain the religion that he finds in the kingdom in which he enters'. Persons suggested that, with the pope's permission, the book should be translated because 'it is small and pestilent'.⁸¹

Constraints of space preclude a fuller examination of Persons's or the Catholic Church's attitude towards James; nevertheless, Persons's political activities were characterized by an impressive degree of adaptation to fast-changing Continental, as well as British, scenarios. The circumstances surrounding the Latin translation of Persons's *Conference* demonstrate that this adaptability was multi-layered, both in terms of political manoeuvring and of theoretical and theological argumentation. In other words, the Catholic question in England, as both Persons and the Roman Curia understood it, was not simply an English, nor even a British question, but a Continental issue to be approached across many fronts.

At the same time, English Catholicism was itself a complex and fluid entity: Persons's and Creswell's ideas on how the English Catholic community should develop as Elizabeth's reign ended differed from Crichton's, on account, for example, of tension between English and Scottish interests in the internal equilibrium of the British Catholic community, as well as political developments on the Continent. After 1592, Crichton decided that supporting James was the surest way to protect the interests of Catholics living in Scotland and Flanders and to bring about the conversion of both England and Scotland to Catholicism, while Persons and Creswell did not believe that English Catholics should abandon the hope of a Spanish intervention, although the exact terms of this intervention should be adapted according to the short-term shifts on the part of the main players of the game, especially Philip II and Henry of Navarre, who saw their respective international strength and prestige fluctuate dramatically in the late 1580s and 1590s.

Moreover, the Roman Curia itself was far from a monolithic institution: Bellarmine and Aldobrandini entertained very different ideas regarding the political role that the pope should play in Europe, which influenced the ways in

⁸⁰ Persons to Borghese, July 1603, in ASV, Borghese III 124 g. 2, fo. 31r-v.

⁸¹ 'il quale libro tratta de libera et de assoluta monarchia provando che un Re monarcha è soggetto a nessuna legge sed est dominus absolutus omnium, et che nella coronatione ha da giurare di conservare la religione che trova in pie nel regno dove entra et si sua S.tà sarà servito lo faremo tradurre poichè è piccolo ma pestilenziale', *ibid.*, fo. 31v. For further discussion of Persons's relationship with James at the very beginning of his reign see P. Holmes, 'The authorship and early reception', pp. 427-9; and Lake, 'The king (the queen) and the Jesuit'.

which Rome considered the English Catholics and their role within the Christian commonwealth. Bellarmine, the theorist of the papal *potestas indirecta*, appreciated arguments for the centrality of the Pope's spiritual authority in resolving the matter of the succession, while Aldobrandini was interested in the political capital that the English or Scottish Catholics could acquire in the delicate phase of the English succession, which could become a useful asset in the papacy's attempt to remain at the centre of European politics.

Returning to the specific case of the English and Latin versions of Persons's *Conference*, the complex interplay of different interests and concerns, both political and theoretical, suggests two final considerations. First, in examining the English Catholic question we should abandon a strict dichotomy between political and apostolic aims. Both the English and the Latin *Conference* were written, circulated and deployed with an explicitly political agenda, which is nevertheless inseparable from the author's theoretical and theological views as well as those of the 'consumers' of these texts. Secondly, acknowledging a geographically wider set of political and theological interests reveals that the history of English Catholicism might be best understood when examined against a Continental political and religious background, and, conversely, the value of studying English Catholicism in relation to the Continent as a means of understanding the political and religious history of Europe.