

Calvinism, reform and the absolutist state in Elizabethan Ireland. By Mark A. Hutchinson. (Religious Cultures in the Early Modern World.) Pp. xiii + 219. London–Brookfield, VT: Pickering & Chatto, 2015. £60. 978 1 84893 548 8
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This book is presented as an ‘important corrective’ to Quentin Skinner’s *Foundations of modern political thought* (p. 7). Hutchinson challenges the consensus that ‘there is nothing distinctly Calvinist about the political thinking of reformed Protestants’ (p. 4). In fact, he associates Calvinism with ‘proto-absolutism’ in Ireland (p. 12). Elizabethan Ireland, he declares, ‘helps demonstrate how difficult it was for a sense of modernity and political freedom to emerge from a combination of Protestant thought and early modern state theory’ (p. 7). He argues that this has ‘far wider European significance’ (p. 9). However, the evidence underpinning his bold thesis is far more slender than his confident tone insinuates. Finding words like ‘grace’, ‘godly’ and ‘true obedience’ scattered occasionally in the workaday correspondence of a couple of English officials in Ireland is not enough to demonstrate that what he terms ‘Irish government’ was motivated by Calvinism. Summarising John Ponet’s *Politike power* (1556) and Christopher Goodman’s *Superior powers* (1558) is of little value when it cannot be shown that those works were read by or were cited by anyone in Ireland. On the other hand, Richard Beacon’s *Solon his follie* (1594) and Edmund Spencer’s *View of the present state of Ireland* (1596), discussed in chapter vi, seem to contradict the thesis that Calvinism was responsible for an absolutist state in Elizabethan Ireland. Hutchinson’s term ‘Irish government’, always without an article (as in ‘Why Irish government decided’), is problematic. By ‘Irish government’ he means ‘those Protestants involved in Irish government’ (p. 5), and ‘other Protestants involved in Ireland’ (p. 42). He refers to a ‘Calvinist or reformed Protestant grouping that staffed Irish government’, which he equates with Cecil, Walsingham and Leicester in England without even a hint of sarcasm (p. 2). These men were ‘English reformed Protestants in Ireland’ (p. 13). Yet Hutchinson characterises them as ‘Irish reformers’ (p. 3), who engaged in ‘Irish thinking’ about the state (pp. 10–11), devised an ‘Irish definition of civil obedience’ (pp. 30, 40) and formed ‘an Irish state theory’ (chapter vi). Hutchinson represents ‘Irish government’ as an autonomous body of English Calvinists who thought of ‘sovereign authority as distinct from the person of the prince [i.e. Elizabeth] and a corrupt Irish polity’ (p. 13), and ‘sought to put in place a fully reformed church model ... [since] the physical distance separating the prince from the island may have suggested that in Ireland church reform could be pushed much further than that allowed in England’ (p. 28). However, that is all very fanciful. There is no evidence that Elizabeth’s ‘Irish government’ nurtured revolutionary ambitions in Church or State. Hutchinson succeeds in raising important questions about religious influences on English policy in Elizabethan Ireland. The challenge is to disentangle the complex web of influences and considerations that shaped the thinking of English policy-makers, before we can offer convincing answers to such questions.

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