

Sarah Mortimer

Paper: *Justifying the English Republic: Natural Law and Its Limits*
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Sarah Mortimer is a JRF at Gonville and Caius; she completed a D Phil at Oxford in 2007. Her own work centres around the Socinians, that notorious group of heretics now best known for their anti-trinitarianism. But in her thesis she suggested that Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) and his friends were concerned about much more than the trinity. She has come to argue that their ideas, and the reaction which they provoked, could only be explained in the context of a broader discussion about the relationship between natural law and Christianity. For the Socinians developed not only a distinctive theology, but also a highly controversial set of views about earthly life, in which the rules necessary for civil society were distinguished from the ethical standard demanded by God of Christians. They used these ideas to press for toleration and for an end to warfare, particularly warfare undertaken from religious motives. This civil dimension to their theology provoked an outraged response from Protestants who wanted to keep religious and political authority firmly tied together. Yet the Socinians' ideas about the non religious basis for society attracted a certain degree of sympathy in the early seventeenth century, when men wondered how to prevent the politico-religious conflict tearing the continent apart. This European debate provides the background to her paper, which focuses on English arguments concerning the natural law in the late 1640s.

Paper Introduction

When faced with the task of prosecuting King Charles I, John Cook based his case upon the 'Law of nature [which] is the Law of God written in the fleshly tables of mens hearts'. In reaching for the law of nature to justify resistance, he stood within the mainstream of European resistance theorists from the late sixteenth century. In my paper I discuss the concept of natural law employed by the regicides and their friends, emphasising the Christian dimension. I go on to examine two critics of their position. One, Anthony Ascham, sought to damp down its disruptive potential by disentangling natural law from Christianity. The other, Thomas Hobbes, agreed with Ascham that natural law must be based on the right of self preservation, but he insisted that it must be welded firmly to Christianity. These diverse arguments led to very different views of the Commonwealth's role - and to a flourishing discussion about the law of nature which would persist throughout the century.

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