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"The Plainnesse of Useful Truths": Useful Knowledge and English Practical Divinity, 1570-1660

In 1649, the year the English government executed its own monarch and symbolically declared sweeping political and ecclesiastical reform, the theologian John Dury published *The Reformed School,* his model for a school curriculum fitting for the new polity. Dury sought above all to instill "useful" knowledge in the students of his reimagined academy, insisting in the text that "nothing is to bee taught but that which is usefull in it self to the Society of mankind, therein fitting them for employments approvable by the Gospel."[1] He articulates a dual vision for useful knowledge, which would on one hand provide students with "all things which are fundamentall for the settlement of a State in Husbandry, in necessary Trades, in Navigation ...and in Economical Duties," and on the other would "train them up to know God in Christ, that they may walke worthy of him in the Gospell." The pupils in Dury's academy would learn how to efficiently plant crops in their fields, shrewdly trade goods in exchange and astutely interpret scripture in "propheticall exercises."[2] The eclectic elements in this curriculum were all necessary to prepare students to "become profitable instruments of the Common-wealth." [3]

Dury articulated his definition of useful knowledge at a pivotal moment in the history of the concept and in the history of the country. He occupied a prominent position in the network of philosophers, agriculturalists and pedagogues bound by their common associations to Samuel Hartlib, a Prussian émigré from the Thirty Years War and the intellectual correspondent

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[1] John Dury, *The Reformed School* (London, 1649), 19.
[2] Ibid., 28.
[3] Ibid., 18.

extraordinaire of his age, which historians have therefore dubbed the Hartlib Circle. Hartlib's wide-ranging visions for religious and civil reform united Dury and their colleagues around a commitment to contribute to the "improvement" of the Commonwealth and its material wealth.[4] While their proposals for improving the country and their plans for disseminating knowledge differed among themselves, they shared a common language of "useful knowledge."[5] Plans to simplify Latin education, distribute husbandry practices and disseminate trade secrets were all supposed to provide the public with the useful knowledge they needed to improve the country.

Some historians have attributed a far-reaching importance to the reforms the Circle proposed and the language they used to advance them. Joel Mokyr has written extensively on the seminal role that the collection and dissemination of "useful knowledge" played in England's early technological innovation that spurred the Industrial Revolution.[6] According to Mokyr one could only have useful knowledge of a limited range of objects, specifically, "natural phenomena that potentially lend themselves to manipulation, such as artifacts, materials, energy and living beings."[7] While Mokyr, modern readers and nineteenth-century industrialists might have recognized this materialistic definition, John Dury evidently did not. If he had he would not have incorporated Bible-reading and "propheticall exercises" in his curriculum for useful knowledge. Useful knowledge might have encompassed only "natural phenomena" by the Industrial Revolution, but it had not by the Interregnum.

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[4] For a history of the concept of "improvement" and its particular transformation in the hands of the Hartlib Circle, see Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 91–129.

[5] Koji Yamamoto, "Reformation and the Distrust of the Projector in the Hartlib Circle," *Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (June 2012): 378.

[6] Joel Mokyr has developed this thesis throughout several books and articles, including, *The Enlightened Economy: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: The Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[7] Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: The Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy*, 3.

Dury's inclusion of devotional practices and scriptural exegesis within his conception of useful knowledge continued an English Protestant tradition that pervaded religious culture in the first half of the seventeenth century and attached particular devotional significance to the "use" and "application" of Biblical doctrines in daily life. This tradition emerged from the teachings and genres of English practical divinity expounded widely in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The authors of these texts articulated principles of sermon-composition and catechetical method as contributions to contentious theological debates that divided the Elizabethan church. Though the contributors to this literature fundamentally disagreed about the status of the clergy and the mechanics of inspired exegesis, they shared a common concern with their parishioners' ability to apply the doctrines that their ministers debated. The distinction between "doctrine" and "use" prevailed not only in popular preaching manuals but also structured the sermons that parishioners heard throughout the early Stuart period, so much so that by 1612 it had acquired a reputation as the "English model" for constructing a sermon.[8]

By emphasizing the devotional importance of applying the doctrines of the scripture in daily life, theologians and ministers articulated distinct relationships between knowledge and its use. According to the preaching manuals and theological treatises examined below, a parishioner who "used" a doctrine in daily life publically testified that he had understood the correct meaning of the scripture. Writers of practical divinity sought to inculcate this use precisely because of the public nature of its performance, and the centrality of that performance in public would define the way that contemporaries understood useful knowledge. Reading Dury and his colleagues' proposals together in the light of the contemporary theological discourse on knowledge and its use suggests that throughout the century before the 1660, "useful knowledge"

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[8] Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590-1640* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

was distinguished not by its secular subject matter but rather by its capacity to "edify" a public. English divines carried out theological debate and Biblical study under a common assumption that the doctrines they identified in the scripture ought to be not only correct in interpretation, but also useful for edification. The notion that knowledge needed to be useful to be legitimate, and to be a legitimate object of study, did not emerge in the seventeenth century to challenge theology from without, but rather grew out of theological debates that pitted different visions of the church and its pastoral obligation against one another.

The authors who first developed the literature of practical divinity contrasted their principles and practice against the formal clerical education provided at the universities. Richard Greenham founded his "household seminary" at the margin (quite literally) of Cambridge University after he left his fellowship to preach in neighboring Dry Drayton in 1570.[9] Greenham left the university, he later claimed, because he recognized the yawning gap that divided the scholastic logic and rhetorical forms in the tutors' lessons from the daily responsibilities of pastoral ministry. He lamented the "preposterous zeal and hasty running of young men into the ministry" which delivered young graduates who had mastered syllogistic reasoning but never practiced compelling preaching in country pulpits.[10] He insisted that ministers learn to preach by preaching in preparation themselves, and to administer the gospels by living in accordance with the doctrines. He cited scripture to justify his emphasis on the "practice" of the ministry, relying for his proof text on Christ's declaration in Luke 11:28, "Blessed are those who heare and doe."[11] His idiosyncratic translation of the verse laid the foundation for his idea of a ministry

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[9] Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, 13.

[10] Richard Greenham, "Rylands English MS 54," in *"Practical Divinity": The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham*, ed. Kenneth Lawrence Parker and Eric Carlson (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 54r–v.

[11] Greenham, "A Profitable Treatise, Containing a Direction for the reading and understanding of the holy Scriptures," in Parker and Carlson, *Practical Divinity*, 344. I cannot locate this particular English translation. Both the Geneva Bible and the Great Bible, with which Greenham may have been familiar, translate it as "Blessed are

authorized by a practice of the doctrines rather than mere learning of them, expressed in his claim, "The rule of reason in all things is, that the best way of learning is by practice: then how much more if wee practice will God increase our talents."[12]

This rule guided Greenham's advocacy for a "practical divinity" that would train ministers through practice, but that practice would be required on both sides of the pulpit. Just as Greenham insisted that ministers must learn to preach a sermon by practice, so too could his parishioners only comprehend the sermon through their own practice of its principles. Greenham therefore considered the congregation's personal engagement with doctrines through reflective meditation in the soul and personal application in life to be the "fruits" produced by an effective and affective ministry. He instructed the students who studied under him at Dry Drayton to search for the visible signs of this devotional practice which could attest to the quality of the ministry, even if those signs, such as crying in church and living according to doctrines, came long after a sermon. While the practical fruits of parishioners' "meditation of the affections" might not immediately arise during the sermon, they were nonetheless the testaments to the minister's success in preaching. The centrality of practice in Greenham's conception of pastoral care, both as a pedagogical tool of the minister and as the devotional fruits of his preaching and living, marginalized formal learning as insufficient to prepare and authorize the ministry.

Greenham's pastoral theology responded to the question of how the English church could achieve such edification, which had garnered considerable controversy throughout the 1570s and increasingly divided puritan and conformist camps of the Elizabethan church. A common concern for edification fissured into different approaches in the wake of the Admonition

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those who heare the word of God and keep it." Greenham may have been offering a subtle but significant paraphrase.

[12] Ibid., 345.

Controversy which placed the more puritan Thomas Cartwright against the conformist John Whitgift in a debate that spanned a series of publications and rebuttals printed throughout the 1570s over the church's pastoral obligations to its parishioners. Cartwright interpreted Paul's cryptic claim in Romans 10:17 that "faith is by hearing" as an injunction against ministers who read pre-set script from the Book of Common Prayer without the inspired preaching of an original sermon.[13] Whitgift provided a less demanding gloss on Paul's statement and defended the liturgy based on the Book of Common Prayer and a ministry with just enough education and preparation to read from it. This tear in the interpretation of Paul frayed other interwoven theological fibers over the nature of inspiration, the sufficiency of scripture for edification, the proper form of church government and the relation between the church and the civil state. Those intellectual differences were framed around a pragmatic concern with the church's investment in the education of its ministers.

In the hands of Robert Browne, a student of Greenham's household seminary, his mentor's sentiments became weapons to level the institutions of the episcopacy, particularly the universities and the exegetical authority they claimed to convey. He and those he influenced exploited the gap that Greenham opened between university divinity and pastoral preaching to claim that learning was not only *insufficient* but *unnecessary* for effective preaching. In so doing, he sparked a debate against more moderate theologians on the relationship between the use of Biblical doctrine and humane learning. In 1582, Browne published his *Treatise upon the 23. of Matthew,* in which he lambasts the university learning that the bishops and learned ministers cited to justify their episcopal authority. He articulates his criticism of the universities and their episcopacy by presenting a theory of Biblical exegesis that provides no place for "humane

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[13] Hunt, *The Art of Hearing*, 30–31.

learning." He cites scriptural precedent to argue that the prophets never needed the knowledge of

syllogistic logic and formal rhetoric which the learned ministry cited to justify their privileged

exegesis, asking, "Coulde Ezra give the meaninge of the Scriptures, as in Nehem. 8. or coulde

the people understande his meaningse without your Syllogismes, without predicables and

predicamentes, and your arguments of Invention?"[14] Browne concludes that if the Hebrew

prophets like Ezra could edify the people without recourse to Aristotelian logic, so could English

ministers.

Browne's arguments rest on an understanding of an effective sermon as a form of

prophecy, an equation which would have been widely accepted since marginal glosses in the

popular Geneva Bible had equated prophecy with preaching.[15] Theologians summoned a range

of proof texts to provide a guide for how a true prophet might be discerned from a false one.

They often turned to precedents in Paul, specifically in 1 Corinthians 14, in which Paul cautions

the Corinthians to distrust those prophets who speak in "strange tongues" because true prophets

"speaketh unto men to edifying, and to exhortation, and to comfort."[16] Paul and those who

interpreted him insisted that a prophet prove his authority by "edifying" the congregation.

Greenham had embraced this concern with edification and placed it at the core of his practical

divinity.[17] Browne contrasts the Hebrew and early Christian prophets, who did fulfill their

prophetic duty by edifying their congregations without recourse to syllogistic reasoning, against

the learned clergy of his own day, who demonstrated their ineptitude by confusing their

parishioners with scholastic jargon. Browne's argument from the example of Ezra rests not so

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[14] Browne, "A Treatise Upon the 23. of Matthewe," 173.
[15] Roger E. Moore, "Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, no. 1 (2010): n.12–13.
[16] 1 Corinthians 14:2-6, 3 Geneva Bible 1599.
[17] Greenham, "Rylands English MS 54," 7v.

much on Ezra's neglect of logic, but on Ezra's audience's ability to "understand" him and be edified without it. Browne's criticism of logic, and later rhetoric, by way of Corinthians lead him to a particular condemnation of these curricular mainstays, specifically, that they are useless, declaring, "Beholde all their Logicke is in names and wordes, without anie use."[18] Browne maintains his critique by consistently targeting this "use," or lack thereof, of the logic.

With these condemnations, Browne extends Greenham's emphasis on personal application of doctrine as a tool both for edifying the congregation and measuring the congregation's edification to its most extreme conclusions. If a minister's sermon was only prophetic if it edified, and if the congregation was only edified when it could apply the doctrines of the sermon to their lives, then no sermon could be prophetic if the parish could not use the doctrine that the minister preached. It was not enough to say the prophets should not *only* resort to useless knowledge of logic and rhetoric in their sermons, as Greenham maintained, but rather, Browne insisted, they should not employ those methods *at all*. Indeed, such pedantry was enough for any parishioner familiar with Paul's condemnation of "diverse tongues" in 1 Corinthians 14 to suspect the absence of the Spirit in his learned minister. This argument introduced "public" knowledge as a criterion for useful knowledge, and succeeding scholars would continue to grapple with the relationship between the two throughout the century.

The arguments that Browne generated stirred controversy not only within the writings of theologians and the cloisters of the universities, but responded to contemporary debates within the more puritan wing of English Protestantism over the institutional organization of the Elizabethan and Jacobean church. The act of prophesying which theologians interpreted and debated became institutionalized as early as the 1560s in the form of "prophesyings," in which

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[18] Browne, "A Treatise Upon the 23. of Matthewe," 177.

ministers and often parishioners gathered to interpret and discuss complicated passages of

scripture.[19] These gatherings differed from parish to parish, with some serving as examination

exercises for less educated ministers and others operating as public meetings for lay people to

participate in exegesis. These meetings took on a particular significance in more puritan parishes,

where laypeople's participation in their own edification proved a more pressing imperative.[20]

The active involvement of such "vulgar peeple" in "disputation and new divisd opinions far

unmeete" concerned Elizabeth, who ordered Archbishop Grindal in 1576 to suppress the

meetings across England.[21]

Questions over who could claim the authority to prophesy therefore gained a particular

prescience for the more puritan theologians of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean period

who struggled to defend the value of these conferences while condemning both the episcopal

hierarchy of the established church and repudiating the lay prophesyings of the 1570s. In his

widely-read manual *The Art of Prophesying,* translated from Latin and published in 1607,

William Perkins toed this middle way by maintaining the Pauline proof-text for prophecy while

also insisting, against Browne on the necessity of a ministry learned in rhetoric, logic and the

Biblical languages.[22] Like Greenham, Perkins emphasizes the pedagogical importance of the

minister's own use and application of the doctrine on which he preaches in order to demonstrate

the spirit, instructing, "Because the doctrine of the word is hard both to understand and to bee

practiced, therefore the Minister ought to express that by his example, which he teacheth as it

were by a type," since "words make not such an impression in the soule as workes doe."[23]

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[19] Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Methuen, 1967), 170.
[20] Ibid., 171.
[21] Elizabeth to John Whitgift, 1577, qtd. in Moore, "Sir Philip Sidney's Defense of Prophesying."
[22] Dixon, Practical Predestinarians in England, C. 1590–1640, 8. Dixon claims that Perkins, along with two other authors, "authored and co-authored texts which ran into so many editions that they would rival the claims to 'popularity' of any writer during this period."
[23] Ibid., 136–138.

If the minister's performance of the uses and applications of doctrine unites him and his

congregation in common devotion, when would he need university learning? Perkins struggled

to find a place for rhetoric and logic in his homiletics but insisted on their necessity for an

effective minister, so he granted them a prominent place in his hermeneutics. He dissented from

the traditional account of the "fourfold" meanings of scripture and collapsed them into the

"sense" and "application" of the scripture.[24] That simplified hermeneutic schema, however, did

not preclude the possibility of confusion or ambiguity. When the minister encounters "dark,

cryptic places" in the scripture, he ought to find recourse in "the laws of logic" and knowledge of

the "Grammatical and Rhetoricall proprieties of words" to extract the correct sense and

application, according to Perkins.[25] Though logical parsing and grammatical analysis help the

minister in his study, they only hinder his mission in the pulpit. Perkins maintains the critique of

ministers who use Latin and Greek and discuss rhetorical figures in their sermons because they

"disturb the mindes of the auditors" and "drawe…the mind away from the purpose to some other

matter," which occludes the demonstration of the Spirit.[26] Perkins draws the moderate

conclusion that the minister ought to "privately use at his libertie the artes, philosophie, and

varietie of reading" but "he ought in publicke to conceale all these from the people, and not to

make the least ostentation."[27]

Perkins constructed an epistemology that distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge:

that whose use can edify a public to use that knowledge too, and that whose use confuses a

public, fails to edify and can be judged only by the learned. A minister who pedantically flouted

his knowledge of the liberal arts had a very different effect on a public audience from one who

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[24] Ibid., 31.
[25] Ibid., 50–51, 65.
[26] Ibid., 136.
[27] Ibid., 133.

simply embodied an example of godly behavior, even though private study of those liberal arts really was necessary for that life in accordance with Biblical doctrine. If we understand claims to knowledge that has a "use" in the early seventeenth century as claims to knowledge that could be publicly adjudicated according to its ability to be used and to instill use in others, then we can explain how advocates could consider practical divinity and husbandry both useful. Specifically, we can read John Dury and his colleagues' proposals for education in practical divinity as part and parcel of the Hartlib Circle's program for useful knowledge in the material *and* spiritual improvement of the country. This reading will reveal how natural phenomena did not hold a monopoly as the subjects of useful knowledge, and that the concept continued to enjoy a prominent place in English pastoral theology.

Dury devoted considerable energy to writing about the need to collect and distribute knowledge of practical divinity before and during the revolutionary years that nurtured the Hartlib Circle and their plans. As early as 1631, as many clergymen struggled to respond to the challenge posed by the Arminian ecclesiastical ascent, John Dury envisioned a community of Protestants unified around a common adherence to a "manual of practical divinity." Dury and his supporters in this endeavor considered the publication of common texts of practical divinity a step toward the legitimate unification of not only English Protestant sects but Continental churches as well.[28] He claims in a later tract from 1652 that his adopted nation (having relocated from Scotland himself) excelled in "matters of practical divinity, wherewith God hath blessed us above the rest of the Churches which should be gathered out of our English Writers, and being translated and compiled into a Body, and imparted unto them, they would make use thereof."[29]

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[28] Ibid., 259.

[29] John Dury, *The Reformed Spiritvall Husbandman with an Humble Memorandum Concerning Chelsy Colledge, and a Correspondencie with Forreign Protestants.*, Early English Books, 1641-1700 / 1667:16 (London, 1652), 36.

Scholars writing about Dury have considered his notion of "practical divinity" a deliberate antithesis to "scholastic" divinity.[30] Dury's own descriptions are barely more precise. He wrote extensively about the need for scholarship and publication on practical divinity, but his collected works do not leave a clear impression of what scholarship or teaching in the practical divinity in which the English supposedly excelled might look like. In a publication from 1658 pressing his advocacy for a collective scholarly effort at compiling a "body of practicall divinity" published, Dury divides "practical" from "theoretical" truths that are contained in the scriptures. The study of "practical divinity" encompasses the former, which are all those truths which are "proportionate...to the production of the life of God in the soul of a Beleever." Theoretical truths do not, by themselves, compel Christians to "become fruitfull in the actions of vertue," but when believers apprehend practical truths they recognize how to live a "life of God in the soul."[31] This description suggests that the "body of practical divinity" contained moral prescriptions extracted from scripture which could be applied differently by individuals to their own lives. Because the truths of practical divinity are the requisites for a visible "life of vertue," he judged their pursuit "of farre greater concernment unto all, and far more to be heeded, estemmed, and entertained in the Schools of the Prophets, then the study of contemplative Mysteries and notions of Divinity."[32] He claims that the emphasis on these "contemplative mysteries" lay at the heart of the fissiparous divisions of the Protestant churches across Europe, condemning the pedants who "fill the Churches with disputes, and the heads of ignorant people with profane babblings,

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[30] John Batten, *John Dury: Advocate of Christian Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), 131; Scott Mandelbrote, "John Dury and the Practice of Irenicism," in *Religious Change in Europe 1650–1914: Essays for John McManners*, ed. Nigel Aston (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

[31] John Dury, *The Earnest Breathings of Forreign Protestants, Divines & Others, to the Ministers and Other Able Christians of These Three Nations for a Compleat Body of Practicall Divinity...*, Early English Books, 1641-1700 / 379:02 (London, 1658), 2–3.

[32] Dury, *The Earnest Breathings of Forreign Protestants*, 3.

which dayly increase unto more ungodlinesse."[33] Only those capable of becoming "fathers" in

the church could aspire to the ability to gather the "more heavenly use" directly from scripture,

so Dury prescribed manuals and education in that method only to the most gifted students.[34] The

theoretical disputation that this "spiritual Analysis" engendered, even when confined to private

correspondence and learned conferences, had to always be grounded in questions of practical

divinity and the improvement of pastoral care. Dury instructed Protestant divines from across the

European churches to "agree upon some profitable way of handling necessary and useful

controversies, and of shunning profane and vain bablings."[35] Any discussion of theoretical truths

that was not "subservient and subordinate" to practical truths strayed into the territory of the kind

of "science falsely so-called" that Paul condemned in 1 Timothy 6:20.

A common concern for providing public edification runs through Greenham's

recommendations for a prophetic pulpit ministry, to Browne's plans for the erasure of "science

falsely so-called" and Perkins' system for plain preaching and private exegesis, and to Dury's

schemes to construct and disseminate a "body of practical divinity." These theologians embraced

sometimes competing claims about the relationship between knowledge and its use in the

practical affairs of life, and all of them lay that relationship at the foundation of their theories of

preaching and their models for church government. The visions for advancing useful knowledge

that abounded among the Hartlib Circle in the Interregnum did not emerge from a secular

epistemology that happened to be submerged beneath the confessional politics and theological

discord of the first half of the seventeenth century. Rather, in the hands of Dury and his

contemporaries, "useful knowledge" linked those divisive English Protestant theologies with

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[33] Ibid., 30.
[34] Ibid., 38.
[35] Dury, *The Earnest Breathings of Forreign Protestants*, 37.

national material improvement schemes within a common framework for the production and dissemination of truth. The ubiquity of this concept in the middle of the seventeenth century suggests continuity rather than disjuncture between the debates over the production of authoritative knowledge that divided theologians in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods and those that engaged the improvers of the Interregnum and Restoration.