Book reviews

The Practice of Devotion in Early Modern Britain

Jessica Martin and Alec Ryrie (eds.), Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain (St Andrews studies in Reformation history), Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012; viii + 285 pp.; ISBN 9781409431312; £ 79.00.

Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie (eds.), Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain (St Andrews studies in Reformation history), Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013; vi + 250 pp.; ISBN 9781409426042; £ 70.00.


The books under review here advance an approach to early modern religious history which owes a considerable debt to anthropology. All three works focus on how religion was practised, rather than theorized, debated, or sanctioned. It quickly becomes clear, however, that such distinctions are hard to maintain. Vital experimentation was to be found in the seemingly mundane aspects of religious life in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, creating tensions which further complicate and enrich our understanding of early Protestantism.

Private and Domestic Devotion is a book “about how people in early modern England and Scotland prayed when they weren’t in church” (p. 1). The first two essays lay down solid foundations: focusing on England, Ian Green tackles some who, how, and why questions and Jane Dawson looks to Scotland to consider some where, what, and when questions. Context was, unsurprisingly, formative to the character and function of prayer. Individuals, households, and churches each wrestled with defining and then fulfilling their devotional responsibilities; but, ‘the strong strand of continuity within devotional practices helped the transition from late medieval Catholicism to Reformation Protestantism’ (p. 34). Ten specialist essays follow.

Erica Longfellow places Eikon Basilike (1649) within early modern discussions about religious solitude. When presenting Charles I as “alone in prayer” (p. 58), the writer(s) of the text exploited “the English perception of solitary prayer as diminished and inferior” to turn “royal arrogance” into an act of self-imposed “suffering” (p. 63 and p. 61). Longfellow’s argument is intriguing rather than convincing, for solitary prayer remained an ideal for many Protestants (see,
Being Protestant, pp. 155-67). Alec Ryrie interrogates Protestant experiences of sleeping, waking, and dreaming. Prayers “not only sought sweet rest”, but offered a “means to it” (pp. 80-81). “Waking prayer was not so much a duty as a symptom of your spiritual state” (p. 83). And, dreams “provided a spiritual gauge which was otherwise rarely available” (p. 91). Notwithstanding some fascinating analysis, Ryrie’s study projects a somewhat idealized picture which fails to engage with the insights of A. Roger Ekrich’s noteworthy essay ‘Sleep We Have Lost’ (2001).

Through a close reading of the writings of Anne Lock (fl. 1560) which were bound within her edition of the Sermons of John Calvin (1560), Micheline White explores how select biblical passages (especially Isa. 38:9–22 and Psal. 50/51) were imbued with new forms of meaning inflected by Calvinist anti-Catholicism. Early Protestant devotion to the Cross was, as Jessica Martin makes clear, hardly devoid of sensual experience; although, in contrast to a Catholic sense of the Passion, it was “refracted through Pauline theory, where knowing Christ crucified is a mode of life, […] rather than a meditation upon an event” (p. 123).

Marking a distinction between learning religious history and undertaking worship, Tara Hamling shows how “crafted images and objects distributed around the domestic interior could function as mnemonic tools to reinforce learning, to prompt and support approved forms of Protestant prayer” (p. 137). Whilst an exemplary study of its kind, it is a moot point whether Hamling’s reliance upon cognitive anthropology actually creates a barrier to historicizing early modern domestic spirituality. In addressing the tension between “lay Bible reading” and clerical “exegesis”, Kate Narveson shows how the “laity were not called to interpret Scripture”, but rather asked to implicitly “confirm the grounds of doctrine already laid down elsewhere” (pp. 167-68). Narveson’s essay may have benefited from a more robust consideration of the relationship between hermeneutics and exegesis; and, it is a shame that Andrew Cambers’s impressive Godly Reading (2011) arrived too late to be included in Narveson’s thinking. Jeremy Schildt investigates manuscript notebooks to understand better the “skills of biblical devotion” (p. 195): in the case of the nonconformist minister Owen Stockton (1630–1680) and his wife Elianor, “reading and reflection, writing and re-reading” are presented as “transforming the Word read into the Word written into the Word lived” (p. 205). This claim is thought-provoking; but then, it surely owes much to the seminal essay ‘Studied for Action’ (1990) by Lisa Jardine and Antony Grafton, and more problematically, risks reducing the acquisition and expression of spiritual knowledge to a set of worldly, inter-textual skills and strategies.
Hannibal Hamlin notes how, among both Catholics and Protestants, the “ecumenical appeal of the Penitential Psalms” (p. 221) meant they were “an essential piece of the furniture of domestic devotion” in the early modern home (p. 235). Yet, Beth Quitslund observes how singing the Psalms emerged out of an evangelical impulse for extra-liturgical reform. Functioning between “pastime and recreation”, prescribed learning was turned into a communal, domestic activity of “devotional expression”, especially at times of joy and distress (p. 240). Here the historical detail is most welcome; but it is unclear whether the general thrust of the discussion goes much beyond Patrick Collinson’s essay ‘Elizabethan and Jacobean Puritanism as Forms of Popular Religious Culture’ (1996) – strangely not cited by Quitslund.

Finally, Alison Shell examines John Austin’s Devotions in the Ancient Way of Offices (1668): a Catholic book which gained cross-confessional appeal. The Devotions gave spiritual succour to Catholic households by providing readers with the tools to “practise fraternal correction” and to undertake a “quasi-monastic” form of “intimate worship” (pp. 263, 271). However, as a work of “literary recusancy”, Austin’s text was appropriated and revised by the likes of Theophilus Dorrington, Susanna Hopton, and George Hicks as part of a polymorphous “counter-culture agenda” which spoke to the experiences of non-jurors, “Anglican” religious societies, and even John Wesley (p. 279). This line of thinking will be invaluable for the next generation of studies on religious activism and association at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Worship and the Parish Church is the companion volume to Private and Domestic Devotion and explores the “experience of parish worship in England and Scotland during the Reformation and the century that followed” (dust jacket). The volume comprises ten essays. When it came to Elizabethan baptism and burial, Hannah Cleugh shows how a tendency to uphold some pre-Reformation practices complicated the Church’s commitment to predestinarian soteriology, marking a distinction between “what “the Church” believed and what its members learnt as they participated in its services” (p. 30).

Natalie Mears investigates the official, specially commissioned liturgies that complemented the Book of Common Prayer. These “nationwide prayers, fasts, and thanksgivings were not “strategies of persuasion” to shore up Tudor authority”, but part of an ongoing tradition designed to elicit constructive forms of collective action in response to the apparent interventions of divine providence (p. 52). Mears’s unwillingness to consider a more nuanced approach to religio-political propaganda is something of a weakness. But, the significance of the study is, as Mears herself states, to force scholars to differentiate between different strands of liturgical practice when considering the nature and speed of
changing attitudes to reform and conformity (p. 53). Turning to official primers, Bryan Spinks presents a twofold argument: primers “added to the other ambiguities and mixed messages of the Elizabethan Settlement of Religion” by helping to maintain a “more traditional Catholic piety” (p. 81); and, as they were superseded by collections of prayers, communicants gradually became habituated to more Protestant modes of private devotion that were “quite different from the form of public worship of the corporate Church” (p. 85).

Alec Ryrie takes on the subject of fasting. Up to around 1550, “fast-breaking” was an appealing way of expressing evangelical anti-Catholicism (pp. 93-94). Tudor Protestants were, however, quick to ensure that fasting remained a pious ideal. Whilst ‘Reformed’ fasting was certainly different to its Catholic predecessor, there remained “a tendency to drift back” to quasi-Catholic “patterns of regular observation” (p. 102). Here Ryrie perceptively advances the historiography on both how people became Protestant and the subsequent “instability and contradictions of Protestantism” (p. 108).

Three essays address matters musical. Peter McCullough shows how Jacobean ecclesiastical culture gave rise to a brief period whereby preachers and choirs were not necessarily seen in binary, oppositional terms. The intervention of Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626) exemplified a “synthesis of music and word” (p. 129): a significant claim which will challenge scholars to rethink the links between Andrewes and William Laud (1573–1645). Jonathan Willis reveals how “the ambivalence of the Reformed Church of England towards the role of music in religious worship” reflected some aspects of not just continental ‘Reformed’ Protestantism, but also patristic and biblical theology (p. 141). For Willis, Reformation music should be set in the wider context of “the early modern discourse of music” so that historians can understand its internally conflicted nature without explaining it away or artificially resolving its “creative tension” (p. 142). Such an approach leads to a useful thickening of the historiography, even if Willis’s recourse to Foucault seems a touch perfunctory. By deftly contextualizing a limited selection of loaded sources from ecclesiastical court records, Christopher Marsh counters the idea that bell ringing without divine service emerged as a “secular” activity of boisterous pleasure (p. 164). Instead, various forms of recreational bell ringing appeared to have helped satisfy a lingering yearning to express “deeply traditional socio-religious instincts that had been endangered by Reformation beliefs and sensibilities” (p. 168).

John Craig examines how the contested use of voices, eyes, and (men’s) hats whilst praying in public made some congregations dynamic participants in the shaping of liturgical culture. Some lay worshipers found ways of modulating their own experiences of public prayer with “sighs and groans” to show, by means of
affect, “fervency and sincerity” (p. 182). Furthermore, the traditional practice of looking heavenward in prayer was gradually undermined by those who thought that worshipers should close their eyes to avoid worldly distractions (p. 186). Moving beyond a simple account of the Laudian reforms, Trevor Cooper reveals the creative eclecticism behind the selection, arrangement, and usage of church furniture by the Ferrar family at Little Gidding. Key features of the Ferrar’s public worship included: a medieval eagle lectern, two pulpits, arcaded seating facing each other down the walls of the nave, the absence of a chancel screen, and lots of flowers. Lest scholars should think otherwise, avant-garde conformist worship in the 1630s could be a distinctly polymorphous enterprise. Judith Maltby ends the volume by exploring how The Directory for the Public Worship of God (1645) “represented a radical departure not only from the worship of the Elizabethan Settlement, but from aspects of the very Reformed tradition within which it claimed to stand” (p. 225). Here, the failure of Directory owed more than a little to the way it misjudged the capacity of ministers to perform their duties without a robust prescribed liturgy, “the Holy Spirit notwithstanding” (p. 240).

Working with plenty of hitherto unstudied primary source material, these two edited volumes speak persuasively of an enduring need amongst early modern men and women to locate and use diverse worldly resources to help them in their day-to-day devotions. There is, however, cause for some grumbles. Cynical readers might well guess that these books have their origins in a funded research ‘network’. With a few exceptions, the studies therein are disappointingly insular. For all the fresh detail, the scholarship could be said to aim at extending and consolidating recent research endeavours rather than forging ahead to bring original insights. There is limited engagement with European contexts. Despite explicit reference to ‘Britain’ in both titles, Scotland is under-represented and there is no discernible coverage of Wales or Cornwall. The lack of reference to Ireland should be noted too. There is little willingness to identify, let alone avoid, the methodological pitfalls of either interdisciplinary enquiry or an anthropologically inflected religious history. And, in defining a sharp contrast between everyday piety and religious politics, there is a strange, uncritical tendency to describe devotional practices in the context of the consequences of Reformation rather than interpreting them as actually formative in the process of Reformation.

Alec Ryrie’s hefty Being Protestant in Reformation Britain seeks to eschew all things theoretical in favour of an “empiricist” history that concentrates on “the material reality of the past” (p. 9 and p. 10). Working against studies that either perpetuate an account of “the puritan-conformist division” (p. 8), or claim to take the history of religious belief “seriously” whilst continuing to peddle “secular assumptions” about the realities of early modern religiosity (p. 13),
Being Protestant does a remarkable job of answering many fundamental, but hitherto unanswered, questions about how “earnest” British Protestants lived their lives (p. 9). Focusing on the period between 1560 and 1640, Ryrie makes a case for an “intense” and “dynamic” Protestantism that enveloped its “many contradictions” within “a broad, unified, religious culture” defined in chronological, geographical and confessional terms (pp. 469–71). The book is divided into five parts: the Protestant emotions; the Protestant at Prayer; the Protestant and the Word; the Protestant in company; and, the Protestant life.

“Emotion was a form of revelation” (p. 40). Protestant piety began through “despair”, but contrary to the Weberian myth this affection reflected a more general formative belief in and fear of the Devil. “Mourning” was the emotion of repentance, working through prayer, self-examination, and self-punishment to allow sinners to see themselves and God “more clearly” (p. 61). “True repentance” then had to be matched by a yearning in pious living for god’s gift of an earnest “desire” for “holiness, and for God himself” (p. 63). Such earnest affections helped create the conditions for moments of spiritual “joy”, an “emotional accompaniment to true knowledge” (p. 89).

Private prayer was “the active expression of the Protestant emotional life” (p. 99). The length, regularity, and quality of prayers were all tempered by the practical concerns of everyday life. Solitary prayer was “longed for, feared, and scarcely to be had” (p. 169). Notwithstanding controversy over the liturgy, the physicality of private prayer maintained strong continuities with pre-Reformation traditions, even if modulated by distinctly Protestant aspirations. The relationship between extempore and set prayers was typically viewed in pragmatic, rather than ideological, terms; a commitment to the set prayers endured, even if it perpetuated a paranoid fear of the hypocrisy of ‘works’. But then, “to persist in prayer under affliction” was to persist “patiently”, one of the “defining features of Protestant prayer” (p. 243).

“For Protestants, ignorance and sin were almost synonymous” (p. 269). The result was a mode of pious living that fused together “godliness” and “good learning” (p. 270) to nurture a literate, intellectually aspirational culture that thrived in church and at the university, as well as at home and in the street. The skill of “correct Bible reading” was to find the “personal applications of the text” (p. 279). A broader commitment to reading devotional texts showed how “Protestantism was much better equipped than Catholicism to be devotionally omnivorous” (p. 287). When it came to pious writing, “the practice anticipated the prescription” (p. 298). Putting pen to paper was an instinctive route to not just edifying one’s self and others, but also a state of communion with God (p. 312).
Public worship was essentially a test of one’s “duty” (p. 320). The desire to attend church, such as it was, had less to do with servicing ideological commitments to either ceremony or preaching, than a craving for collective prayer. A yearning for a personal sense of God’s promise was the driving force behind an anti-Catholic commitment to Baptism. Whilst Holy Communion offered a chance to reach an emotional zenith of the pious life, the prescribed preparation for receiving the sacrament was seen as so daunting that “most lay people” stuck with the “medieval pattern of annual reception” (p. 340).

Experiencing the sermon involved confronting the ebbs and flows of not just a clergyman’s career, but one’s own capacity for church-led learning. Prayer in the household was no insular or subversive affair: it was a means of keeping the “public world” in view and the kernel of godly sociability (p. 378 and p. 390).

“Early modern Protestants did not have a life cycle”, instead they embarked upon a “personal pilgrimage through life and death to their ultimate, pre-ordained destiny” (p. 409). This linear configuration of life engendered a perpetual sense of crisis about one’s state of progression or regression, which in turn fuelled a distinctive sense of striving for the divine. Childhood was the period in which individuals were expected to learn how to be a proper Protestant. Early adulthood was characterized by “conversion”, a series of events by which an individual did not change their beliefs but learned to own them (p. 436). Adulthood was all about striving to live a life of devotion and vocation that was free from hypocrisy and idleness. In death the believer finally reached a moment in which “assurance” could conquer “despair” (p. 468).

In many respects Being Protestant is mightily impressive: it sensitively and comprehensively catches vital aspects of life experienced by those whose existence was spent forging resourceful, and unwittingly inclusive, pathways between tradition and innovation, theory and practice, truism and paradox, duty and yearning, despair and joy, the ordinary and the extraordinary. In this sense, being Protestant was all about a continual striving for the divine. Ryrie’s vision and skill successfully draws together a range of topics that have, hitherto, been studied somewhat independently of each other. And, the suggestion that “emotion was a form of revelation” (p. 40) is certainly daring.

Despite all this, some readers may well find Ryrie’s book pretty frustrating. There are at least four, inter-related, areas of concern. One, robust historiographical engagement is thin on the ground. Ryrie’s argument for a unified Protestant culture could be seen as a refinement of Ian Green’s distinct sense of “orthodox
Protestantism”, but this is not discussed. Ryrie’s position on the history of emotion is constructed without recourse to the relevant historiography. Moreover, Ryrie chooses to simply avoid thinking about how awkwardly Being Protestant sits alongside works such as Christopher Haigh’s The Plain Man’s Pathways to Heaven (2009), Alexandra Walsham’s Charitable Hatred (2006), Peter Lake’s The Boxmaker’s Revenge (2002), and Keith Wrightson and David Levine’s Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling 1525–1700 (1979). Striving for the divine wrought division as well as unity, and to study the latter without considering its dialectical relationship with the former is more hazardous than Ryrie makes it seem. Two, Ryrie accepts the “inseparability of the personal and the political” in early modern Britain (p. 380), yet struggles to actually evaluate the political dimension to not just the writing of prescriptive texts on piety, but also the religiously inflected inter-personal tensions in households, congregations, and neighbourhoods. Such an approach risks overlooking, or downplaying, various forms of discord.

Three, an attempt to use ‘earnestness’ as a quasi-objective category of historical analysis is problematic because an understanding of earnestness arises from judgement, not observation. Ryrie’s category mistake means that his study does not transcend the problems associated with the history of Puritanism in the way that he suggests; in fact, it threatens to return readers to an outmoded method which was effectively blind to the phenomena that constructed and contested patterns of cultural identity. Hence Ryrie’s claim for a Protestantism unified by dynamic earnestness stands on very shaky ground. Four, Ryrie’s ‘empiricism’ risks being little more than a perverse act of doing the cultural history of religion without accepting the validity of the theory that makes such an approach work. Being Protestant is surely all about the ways in which early modern people constantly sought to ‘negotiate’, ‘fashion’, and ‘represent’ the content and function of their lives as pious agents, engendering ‘inter-subjective’ states which have subsequently been labelled as manifestations of Protestantism. But, setting aside the jargon, Ryrie will not countenance such theory-based interpretations; so, what, exactly, gives meaning to his interpretation (if not the “dead hand of Eltonian empiricism”)? In sum: as a scholarly monograph designed to argue a case for a unified Protestant culture, Ryrie’s book is not hugely convincing; as a highly detailed synthesis set within certain implicit limits, however, Being Protestant is a masterful offering.

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Recent research of Puritanism has made two matters increasingly clear. First of all, this movement was a component of international Reformed orthodoxy which, in turn, had the church fathers and medieval theologians as its antecedents. Secondly, John Owen occupied a central place within Puritanism, and this is highlighted by a rapidly growing number of studies focusing on his theology and spirituality. The significant research of Christopher Cleveland is worthy of being noted within this recent revival of Owen-studies. In *Thomism in John Owen*, he assesses an interesting theme by stating that in several ways Owen has been influenced by the important medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and both directly and indirectly by thomistically orientated Roman-Catholic contemporaries such as especially Diego Alvarez (d. 1635) and Dominigo Bañez (1528-1604).

Thomistic influence becomes evident within three areas. First, in regard to the doctrine of God, Owen emphasizes God’s sovereignty and omnipotence, whereby He creates and sustains spiritual life. Secondly, Thomas’ influence can be observed in the area of Christology, where Owen emphasizes Christ’s divine nature as being the secret of his unique personality as well as with respect to the hypostatic unity of his two natures. Cleveland posits furthermore that Thomistic influence is also apparent in Owen’s pneumatology, and particularly in regard to his view on regeneration and sanctification. Aquinas had developed a doctrine of the *habitus*, which he viewed as a human quality forged by repeated activity and expressed in deeds corresponding to this habitus. In addition to there being a natural habitus Thomas also spoke about habitus as being a spiritual quality, given by God as the solid foundation of Christian virtues, such as faith and love. Thomas wanted to emphasize the priority of God’s grace by stating that this habitus is directly infused by God.

Owen improved upon this thomistic emphasis on God’s grace by giving the spiritual habitus a crucial place in his view of regeneration. God bestows this unchangable inner quality upon man, and this renews him and is also determinative for his Christian life. Upon being spiritually exercised, this habitus will yield the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope, whereas spiritual negligence will trigger progressive backsliding. It is especially in his practical