



Peter Iver Kaufman. *Thinking of the Laity in Late Tudor England.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. xi + 175 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-268-03304-0; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-03305-7.



Reviewed by Ronald Fritze (Department of History, Athens State University)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2006)

A Reformation Road Not Taken

Christianity, like most religions, organizes its followers into two groups –clergy and laity. Depending on the historical era or the Christian denomination, the divide between clergy and laity can be wide and rigid or so fluid as to be almost nonexistent. The Catholic Church on the eve of the Reformation considered its priests and other clergy to be a separate and privileged estate from the laity. It was claimed that this situation was part of the natural order of human existence. The clergy through their provision of the sacraments were the primary actors in the drama of salvation while the laity were largely passive spectators. The coming of the Reformation shattered that assumption of priestly privilege without providing a new consensus to replace it. What Reformers thought about the role of the laity in the Church varied widely over time and from place to place. Peter Iver Kaufman's study focuses on what the various Reformers of late Tudor England thought about the laity and how their thinking changed over time. Although focused on the decades of the 1560s, 1570s, and 1580s, Kaufman's study also discusses Reformers' views of the laity from the early years of the English Reformation onward.

Kaufman begins his study with a chapter, "Coming to Terms," which talks about definitions of the word "Puritanism" and other pertinent concepts. Defining "Puritanism" is a thorny problem but Kaufman provides a useful consensus of scholarly opinion. He rejects the approach that defines Puritanism as a position or positions toward the structure of the institutional church and its authority. Following Patrick Collinson and Peter Lake, he views Puritanism as a style of being a Christian, one that emphasizes "inner, spiritual conflict" (p. 17). This conflict brought Puritans closer to God and they were anxious to share that experience of closeness with others, particularly those known collectively as "the people." In Tudor England, however, "the people" did not refer simply to the human population. It had the more narrow meaning of that propertied segment of society that was below the gentry in rank but above the poor. Reformers saw this group, "the people," as a bastion of Protestantism against the re-Catholicizing of England. "The people" of Tudor England sought to emulate the nobility's wealth, eschewed the culture of the poor, and sought to participate in local government and religious affairs.

Kaufman divides the remainder of *Thinking of the Laity* into four chronological chapters. The first of these chapters examines the English Reformers' attitudes about the laity from the beginning of the English Reformation until the accession of Elizabeth I. England had a pre-Reformation history of lay participation in religious matters. The Lollards of the later Middle Ages were a largely lay movement. As a heresy, Lollardy practiced lay participation in administration and religious matters as a matter of necessity. In England, ecclesiastical authorities viewed the laity reading the Bible with deep suspicion due to the example of the Lollards. William Tyndale pushed for greater lay activity in parish affairs. The problem was that many Reformers came to view the empowerment of the laity as destabilizing and dangerous to right belief in Protestant doctrines. Even Luther pulled back from his early advanced positions on the laity. During the reign of Edward VI, foreign Protestant refugees found England to be backward in promoting lay participation, although Jan Á Lasco (Laski) did what he could to promote congregational democracy in his London church. The Edwardian Church did not last long enough to implement Laski's model or all of the plans of Thomas Cranmer. The Marian regime's persecutions created many lay martyrs to Protestantism and John Foxe lovingly recorded their bravery. It was an experience that converted him from a clerical elitist to an advocate of some lay democracy in the church. Marian exiles also experimented with democratic congregational governance, but the Marian exiles that later became Elizabethan bishops by and large forgot their continental experiments.

Queen Elizabeth I and her religious settlement took a top-down approach to church governance as Kaufman's next chapter shows. She and some of her closest advisors had little faith in the common people's ability to handle religious affairs. Laity were theologically ignorant and prone to bad decisions along with contempt for authority. Only close control from above could mitigate those tendencies. Early Elizabeth Reformers were obsessed with the provision of sermons and with good reason. Kaufman asserts that sermons drew the people of London parishes closer together. The destruction of parish guilds and confraternities had little negative impact on the life of those parishes despite claims of earlier revisionist historians to the contrary. A shortage of clergy forced the use of lay readers. Furthermore, the longstanding system of church wardens in parishes was a form of practical lay participation in parochial affairs and social control. People like Jean Morely, William Fulke, and John Jewel argued for greater lay participation through the 1560s even though

Jewel had some misgivings.

Kaufman's third chronological chapter shows how the question of lay participation in the church hung in the balance during the 1570s. Reformers in favor of a greater role for the laity in the church cited the example of the Apostolic Church, a time before the evolution of a formal and credentialed clergy. Conservatives rejected such arguments with the result that tumults such as the Admonition Controversy broke out. Most interestingly, Kaufman points out that advocates of presbyterian democracy during the 1570s, such as Thomas Cartwright and William Fulke, abandoned that position later. Prophesyings, a form of clerical and lay continuing education in the Scriptures, were popular and seen as a way of solidifying the Reformation among the laity. Queen Elizabeth I and conservatives, however, saw the prophesyings as a threat to stability and authority. Ultimately they were suppressed and the opportunity for the laity and the clergy to study the Bible together as equals was lost.

The 1580s saw support for lay participation in religious affairs decline among all segments of English Protestantism. Conformist clergy argued that the Elizabethan religious settlement was sufficient and provided access to true doctrines. There was no need for divisive discussions or questioning of the official religion. Conservative clergy further argued that the laity of the commons were irredeemably ignorant, "Rudesbies" (as they called them) and should have not a voice in religious matters. Not everyone in the clergy followed this conservative conformist program. Robert Browne, George Gifford, and Dudley Fenner all credited lay people with the ability to participate in religious matters, but in the end they also pulled back from support for the laity or, at least, hedged their support. Conservatives identified lay participation in church governance with a corrosive social leveling while radicals feared that given a choice, the laity would slide back into Catholicism. These fears were reinforced by the scandal of the layman William Hackett, who began preaching that he was the Messiah in the summer of 1591. The tide of support for lay participation in the church was ebbing dramatically during the 1590s, not to be revived until the dislocations of Laudianism and the Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century.

Thinking of the Laity in Late Tudor England provides an excellent study of an important movement in the English Reformation that atrophied after a promising start. The Reformation was a movement that initially promised to liberate the laity religiously, but that promise created the possibility of an unwelcome diversity of opin-

ion. Luther and Calvin pulled back from the full implications of a priesthood of all believers, as did most of the senior leaders of the Church of England. But the outcome of the 1590s was not inevitable. As Kaufman points out, things could have been different if the Edwardian Protestant church of Thomas Cranmer had been given more time to take root. What if Elizabeth I had not been so implacably hierarchical in her approach to church governance and doctrine? Most English bishops considered prophesyings to be a useful and controllable form of continuing education for both the clergy and the laity. In this matter, Elizabeth I's personal prejudices, encouraged by the whisperings of a few ultra-conservative councilors and courtiers, shaped the government's religious policy.

What if Elizabeth I had been more flexible? How would a Church of England with greater lay governance have been different from the Jacobean and Caroline churches? That it would have been different is an obvious certainty but just how different is hard to say. The Jacobean church was reasonably popular and commanded a functional consensus. Laudianism aroused much rancor and strife among the laity but it also had its staunch lay supporters. Would lay participation in religious matters have aggravated or defused the religious controversies that helped to bring on the English Civil War? It is an unanswerable question.

Kaufman's book is a useful reminder of the contingent nature of history. Historians should always remember that events did not necessarily have to turn out the way that they did. *Thinking of the Laity* also adds to

the growing list of scholarship that questions revisionist interpretations of the English Reformation's lack of support. Kaufman describes an England that was very divided religiously. Reformed clergy constantly worried about the laity backsliding into Catholicism. At the same time, they also were concerned about other lay people reaching far too radical conclusions from their reading of the Bible and pushing Protestantism into beliefs and practices that were unorthodox and contentious. *Thinking of the Laity* tells of a generally neglected aspect of the English Reformation. It is a story that is given little attention in the recent surveys by Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland* (2003) and Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480-1642* (2003) because it is the story of a stillborn movement.[1] Kaufman's study is thoroughly and convincingly researched. One complaint, however, is the lack of a bibliography, which would be helpful to readers. Otherwise this fine study covers its subject well and is available in paperback.

Note

[1]. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, "Review of Felicity Heal, *Reformation in Britain and Ireland*," H Albion, September, 2003 <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=99421069473047>; and Lori Anne Ferrell on Peter Marshall, *Reformation England, 1480 1642*, H-Albion http://hnet.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h_albion&month=0509&week=c&msg=Mqkxqp92avcLs6GXyoHqkg&user=& (not yet archived).

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Citation: Ronald Fritze. Review of Kaufman, Peter Iver, *Thinking of the Laity in Late Tudor England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

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