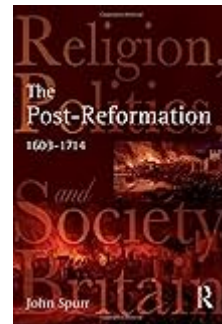




John Spurr. *The Post-Reformation, 1603-1714.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2006. xvi + 387 pp. \$34.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31906-6.



Reviewed by William Gibson (Oxford Brookes University)

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A Fresh New Periodization of the Seventeenth Century

This book is the third in the Religion, Politics and Society in Britain series edited by Keith Robbins. John Spurr (whose previous books have been on the Restoration Church of England, English Puritanism, and England in the 1670s) is well placed to write such a book on the seventeenth century.[1] In the introduction Spurr explores the idea of the period as “the Post-Reformation.” This is not new; there have been proposers of a “long Reformation” that has spilled over into the eighteenth century, including Nicholas Tyacke’s collection *England’s Long Reformation, 1500-1800*. [2] But the idea has important advantages. Spurr suggests that “it allows historians to sidestep crude questions about whether the Reformation had succeeded or failed by 1600 and to explore instead the reality of religious belief and behaviour” (p. 1). Of course, the valuable focus on belief and behavior also allows us more effectively to evaluate the impact of the Reformation. This is important because much of Spurr’s book is occupied by men and women who saw themselves as inheritors of the Reformation.

Spurr’s book is divided into two: the first is eight chapters chronicling the events of the period; the

second—about a third of the book—considers themes in “Religion and Society.” In setting the scene, Spurr makes the important point that “religion in the seventeenth century was not a modern political ‘problem’; it was not an issue like inflation or the use of resources in the health service, to be managed or solved through the application of political strategies. Religion was part of the way that society and politics were constituted” (p. 4). Spurr’s book is not based on archival research, it is a synthesis of the most recent scholarship. In establishing the state of religion at the start of the period, for example, Spurr relies heavily on Patrick Collinson’s view that the Reformation largely took place in Elizabeth’s and James I’s reigns, and that English Protestantism was principally defined by anti-popery.[3] But Spurr also sees the Church of England in 1603 as dominated by a quadrilateral of Calvinism, anti-popery, Sabbatarianism, and worship. In fact, of course, the list could include so much more: disputes over biblical translation, liturgy, episcopacy, attitudes to sin—on and on the list could go.

In the first half of the book, Spurr demonstrates that history is at its best in well-written narrative. Histori-

cal fads, like post-modernism and the rest, come and go, but as an explanation for change and continuity narrative history is the most effective. That is not to say that Spurr sacrifices analysis; along the narrative road there are frequent stops for refreshing analytical discussions, such as tackling the question: “How did James I shape the Church of England?” For Spurr, James’s religious policy was a subtle and supple balancing act in which he ensured that equilibrium in the Church was maintained. Charles I—as Spurr points out—was the first English king to have been born in the Church of England, but he lacked both the skill and perception to see the need to sit astride the see-saw. By siding with Laudianism and Arminianism against Calvinism and Puritanism he made an error as grievous as denying Parliament’s right to control taxation. Perhaps Spurr could have further explored the complex connections between Puritanism and the mercantile interests that helped challenge Charles I. But his coverage of the “three kingdoms” aspect of the religious causes of the Civil War is a model for historians. Spurr suggests that, just as Charles I’s regime unraveled in the 1640s, the Church of England’s polity did also. But while Oliver Cromwell would not allow Parliamentary anarchy and stamped his authority on the government and army, the Church lacked a Cromwell. So while the Commonwealth religious regime was strongly Presbyterian, it also permitted “independency” which allowed regions and congregations to diverge into many variants of Puritan reformed Protestantism—despite attempts to make rigid structures to police the new regime.

In recounting the Restoration Church, the “Black Bartholomew” ejections of 1662 and the anti-Dissent “Clarendon code” of persecuting laws, Spurr comes into his own. But he does not entirely capture the brutality of the persecution of Dissent, nor the thin-lipped malice with which some Anglicans came to regard Dissenters. Laws were, for example, routinely stretched beyond their original intentions or legal limits. So, in the case of the Five Mile Act of 1665 (which forbade ejected Nonconformist clergy from going within five miles of any place in which they had held a church living) Joseph Alleine was forbidden from going within five miles of Bishop’s Hull in Somerset. Alleine had never been a curate at Bishop’s Hull, but he had been curate under George Newton who had once been incumbent of Bishop’s Hull. The law clearly did not intend to exclude such clergy, but the magistrates used it in this way. In the same area, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, Peter Mews, claimed—without any legal foundation—that prosecution and excommunication for non-attendance at Anglican worship prevented

Dissenters from voting in Parliamentary elections. In this persecuting atmosphere, and with Charles II a crypto-Catholic and his heir an open one, every event took on a religious dimension, culminating in the Exclusion crisis.

Spurr is more generous to James II than most historians, claiming that “in all likelihood James had no desire to force the English into Catholicism” (p. 173).[4] If not, he disguised it well, and looked for a model to a king (Louis XIV) who most certainly did. Whatever his views on James’s intentions, Spurr concedes that he managed to alienate even his most loyal supporters—the men who had argued against his exclusion: the High Anglicans. Spurr also captures—albeit perhaps too briefly—the central role of the Church in the Revolution of 1688. It was the seven bishops’ petition and trial in the summer of 1688 that was the opening salvo of the Revolution. But Spurr is at pains to present the Revolution in keeping with the theme of his book, as “one further political readjustment to the complex legacy of the Reformation” (p. 179). This is an interesting view but not one fully developed in the pages that follow. Spurr sees the Toleration Act of 1689 as a consequence of the Revolution but does not connect the Revolution to the Reformation other than to remark that “it confirmed the Protestant Reformation was irreversible” (p. 189). In fact, of course, the Revolution of 1688-89 changed the nature of religion in England and, by legally enshrining (a limited) toleration, it altered the character of English Protestantism. Indeed the following era of religious history might be called the “Post Revolution.” Spurr is right that, under William and Mary, there was a good deal of talk about the Reformation, not least in such ventures as the societies for the Reformation of Manners. But these were in reality features of the “Post Revolution” as much as the “rage of party,” the “battle of the books,” the Convocation controversy, and the Sacheverell crisis.

In the second half of *The Post Reformation, 1603-1714*, Spurr considers the nature of religion and society in the period. Using contemporary sources, both qualitative and quantitative, Spurr shows how religion was central to peoples’ lives. Between 1603 and 1676 the percentage of non-Anglicans rose from 2 percent to 4 percent of the population. Was this an important shift or not? In some places it was not, but in Taunton, Somerset, for example, where in 1715 Dr. John Evans’s list claimed that the town had the single largest dissenting congregation in the country, this had a dramatic impact on religion and politics.[5] Spurr also explores the religious lives of English people in parishes and community in terms of worship, administration, and politics. The nature of worship

in the seventeenth century was not simply governed by the centrality of sermons, attitudes to the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Eucharist; it was also formed by folk religion—which perhaps deserved more of Spurr’s attention. A final chapter on “Religion Outside the Church” considers the experience of those four percent of Non-conformists.

Spurr concludes that the nature of the Post-Reformation as a period is that it was “a struggle between different versions of religion” (p. 328). But, Spurr also asks: “How and when did the Post-Reformation come to an end” (p. 329); perhaps, as Spurr suggests, it was with the Toleration Act in 1689. Though, as he points out, this was not the case in Scotland and Ireland—indeed in Ireland the Reformation “was never completed” (p. 330). The Post-Reformation in England may have come to an end in political terms in 1689, but in theology and ecclesiology the reverberations of the Reformation continued well into the eighteenth century. Nevertheless it seems unlikely that the Post-Reformation will be as successful in periodizing English history as the “long eighteenth century.”

Inevitably in such a review there will be criticisms and disagreements on emphasis and selection. But these should not detract from the book. This is a superb study: readable, accessible, perceptive, and sophisticated in its synthesis of scholarship. Spurr has produced an outstanding book that shows how much seventeenth-century England owed both to religion and to the preceding events of the Reformation. For both undergraduates and advanced scholars this book will prove to be

stimulating and invaluable.

Notes

[1]. John Spurr, *England in the 1670s: “This Masquerading Age”* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); (see Andrew Walkling, “Review of John Spurr, *England in the 1670s: This Masquerading Age*,” H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, July, 2001, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=13406998125509>); *English Puritanism, 1603-1689* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); and *The Restoration Church of England, 1646-1689* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

[2]. Especially the essays by Jonathan Barry, “Bristol as a ‘Reformation City,’” and Jeremy Gregory, “The Making of a Protestant Nation: ‘Success’ and ‘Failure’ in England’s Long Reformation,” in *England’s Long Reformation, 1500-1800* ed. Nicholas Tyacke (London: UCL Press, 1998).

[3]. P. Collinson, *The Reformation: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

[4]. Compare with the most recent scholarship on the Revolution which is largely damning of James: T. Harris, *Revolution: The Great Crisis of the British Monarchy, 1685-1720* (London: Allen Lane, 2006); and Edward Vallance, *The Glorious Revolution: 1688–Britain’s Fight for Liberty* (London: Pegasus Books, 2006).

[5]. W. Gibson, *Religion and the Enlightenment, 1600-1800: Conflict and the Rise of Civic Humanism in Taunton* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).

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