

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Doreen Rosman.** *The Evolution of the English Churches, 1500-2000.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xiv + 399 pp. \$91.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64205-7; \$36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-64556-0.



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## Good in Parts

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Written for the general reader, of whom “no prior knowledge is assumed,” at first sight Doreen Rosman’s history of Christian religion in England since the Reformation seems to be one of those religious histories that will satisfy few readers. A glance at the chapter titles seem neatly to compartmentalize history. The Reformation is tagged “from Catholic to Protestant”; the seventeenth century is labelled “Conflict, Coercion and Compromise”; the eighteenth century is marked by “The Eighteenth Century Revival” and the nineteenth by “The Vigour of Victorian Christianity.” In fact it seems as if Rosman has written a book that could have been written fifty or a hundred years ago. Even the cover illustration (a Victorian Church of England congregation taken from *The Pearl of Days*, 1881) is a cliché. Depressingly the only illustration covering eighteenth-century Anglicanism is Hogarth’s “Credulity, Superstition and Fanaticism” of 1764. It was difficult therefore not to approach this book with a jaundiced eye.

Nevertheless this is a book with some powerful mer-

its. Rosman’s survey of religion on the eve of the Reformation is comprehensive without losing a sense of the diversity of religious practice in England. The nature of medieval faith is explored without reducing it to simplistic statements. The transition from Catholic to Protestant is ably handled and the diversity of responses to the switchbacks of Edward VI’s and Mary’s reigns are explained well. The emergence of the Puritans as “nonconformists” within the Church is also clearly traced without losing a sense of the varieties of Puritan thought or practice. Their tensions with Arminianism in the Early Stuart Church are also analyzed clearly, leading to the divergence of presbyterian and episcopalian strands in the Church. Despite a title that suggests that this book is an institutional chronicle, the effectiveness of Rosman’s handling of the shift of the Church of England to Presbyterianism during the Civil War is partly due to her emphasis on the experiences and beliefs of men and women of all shades of faith which provides flesh for the narrative. Local examples show the diversity that lay beneath the headlines of faith and worship in parishes and this is a product of Rosman’s synthesis of a wide range of

manuscript and printed sources.

Nevertheless there are problems with this survey. As a consequence of addressing the general reader, Rosman does not always convey the complexities of some aspects of the period. The Reformation, for example, emerges as the simple product of Humanism and Henry VIII's dynastic imperative. There is scant consideration of the tensions within religion before the Reformation. The division between Dissent and Anglicanism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is presented in overly monochrome tones, and Dissent in the eighteenth century attracts greater coverage than its declining numbers perhaps justify. Moreover old chestnuts are pulled from the fire and re-presented, despite recent scholarship: eighteenth-century clerical pluralism was widespread and "pluralism was inevitably accompanied by non-residence." Rosman falls back on the mitigation that "this led to some pastoral neglect but much less than was once assumed" (p. 144). And there remains a final defensive paragraph that the eighteenth-century Church has had "a bad press." The eighteenth-century revival is, as so often, portrayed as caused by a melange of inexplicable pan-European, Puritan, free-thinking, High Church, and Moravian stimuli. (Never mind the logical inconsistencies and internal improbabilities of this conflation.)

>From Methodism the book jumps to the 1850s, maintaining the schema of history so familiar to religious historians of the nineteenth century: the Whiggish ascent from eighteenth-century neglect via evangelical revival to muscular Victorian Christianity ("The Vigour of Victorian Christianity"). In the later Victorian period ritualism, temperance, hymns, missions, and chapel-building predominate. All of which makes the first two

decades of the twentieth century a puzzling era of secularism. Rosman suggests reaction to the Great War cast doubts on the existence of Hell—although its participants might have argued otherwise.

Ironically for a Tudor historian, the best of Rosman's book is the synthesis of trends and discontinuities of the last half-century: broad churchmen moved away from Biblical literalism and Jesus became a more accessible figure in religious literature. The story of the decline of church membership, reunion talks between Anglicans and Catholics as well as Anglicans and Methodists, Alpha courses, brittle evangelicalism, and the revival of literalism are woven into an impressive narrative.

There is much about this book that is good. It is well-written and nicely paced. It is clearly the synthesis of a lifetime's reading and scholarship condensed into its pages—though sometimes, as with the eighteenth century, this is disappointingly narrow. But how useful is a book of four hundred pages for the general reader of religious history? It lacks the breadth and scale of Kenneth Hylson-Smith's three-volume *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II* (1997) and does not go much beyond the traditionalism of the recently re-issued Horton Davies's *Worship and Theology in England*. "Good in parts" is perhaps too harsh a judgement of this book—especially as it was with these words that *Punch's* meek curate tells his bishop at breakfast that his rotten egg is edible. This book is not a rotten egg; it is a useful essay on half a millennium. It is a thoroughly competent study, but fails to take the opportunity fully to integrate religion into the political and intellectual life of the country and thereby to offer an over-arching view of the role of religion in people's lives.

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