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Religion on the Run

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The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith. By C. John Sommerville (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992) 227 pp. $39.95

The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair. By John Stachniewski (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991) 416 pp. $95.00

Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France. By Larissa Taylor (New York, Oxford University Press, 1992) 352 pp. $55.00

"At one time English religion had emphasized the static or the recurrent aspects of worship. Then for a century or more, England was conscious of acting a sacred history as opposed to reenacting it" (43). Sommerville's observation should shock no one familiar with his "century or more," roughly 1530 to 1660, although the declared opposition between "acting" and "reenacting" is likely to strike those who still read Bale, Foxe, Dering, or Dell as rather forced.[1] Yet, so many of the contrasts in *Secularization* are terribly suggestive, announcing that religion "was changing from devotion to deliberation" (53).

What may surprise some historians, however, is that Sommerville cleverly crafts fresh distinctions in order to dismantle an old and long-cherished one, to describe, that is, the simultaneous secularization *and* spiritualization of English experience. Textbook wisdom tenaciously holds that secular ambitions and religious

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1 See John Bale, *The Image of Bothe Churches* (London, 1550); John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London, 1563); Edward Dering, *A Sermon Preached before the Quenes Majestie* (London, 1586); William Dell, "The Building, Beauty, Teaching, and Establishment of the Truly Christian and Spiritual Church," in *idem, The Works of William Dell* (New York, 1916; delivered 1646), 98–109.

commitments were inversely related; one rose when the other fell. Hexter called it "the seesaw theory" and, for the tuxedo crowd, "the assumption of the conservation of historical energy." Sommerville, like Hexter, will have none of this up-and-down. His claim is simply that secularization agreed with English Calvinists. "[T]hey gave the process much of its impetus. Protestants believed that the essential features of their religion could not only survive the separation from other aspects of culture but would be purified by the process" (179). Twelve hundred years earlier, following the ostensible conversion of Constantine, Christianity encouraged desecularization. Markus has recently described "the mass Christianization of Roman society," "the absorption" of the secular.[2] Nesting thereafter in Constantine's shadow, church executives cheered the regimes of purportedly sacred monarchs and sometimes themselves dominated municipal, regional, even imperial affairs. How is it conceivable that a religion accustomed to privilege and power would give "the process" of *re*secularization "much of its impetus"?

Of the two obvious answers, the first threads through nearly every study of Tudor absolutism: early modern church officials had no choice. To be sure, at other times in other places, princes and magistrates ran roughshod over their priests, but "no other country had a Henry VIII," Sommerville says, tracing secularization to the Henrician intimidation and confiscations of the 1530s (181). By then, the English episcopacy had a long record of collaboration with the government. Compliance proved a hard habit to break, even when shrines, monasteries, and episcopal manors were converted "to better uses" (20). "Better uses," it was claimed during the decisive decade and from a partisan parliamentary perspective, but it was, as Hoskins ingenuously recalled and conscientiously documented, "an age of plunder."[3]

By all accounts, Thomas Cromwell was the impresario. He had learned from a cardinal (Thomas Wolsey) how to serve a

2 John H. Hexter, *Reappraisals in History* (Evanston, 1962), 40–42; Robert A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), 16–17, 31–32, 125–128, 226–227.

3 Walter G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: King Henry's England, 1500–1547* (London, 1976). Also consult David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge, 1959), III; Felicity Heal, *Of Prelates and Princes: A Study of the Economic and Social Position of the Tudor Episcopate* (Cambridge, 1980); John Joseph Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984); Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation of Cathedrals: Cathedrals in English Society, 1485–1603* (Princeton, 1988).

king, and he masterfully kneaded ecclesiastical endowments and revenues into the ample loaf from which Henry VIII fed his friends and his ambitions. The church had a good deal less to give artists and authors who increasingly turned elsewhere for patronage, with the result that the government, having seized the church's lands and liberties, seized the imagination as well. Generations of church officials were helpless to stop the march from Henry to Thomas Hobbes, save perhaps William Laud. During Laud's pontificate, Canterbury recovered considerable influence, but the recovery was short-lived. Laud's archiepiscopal palace at Lambeth became a prison in the 1604s, as did the Durham cathedral. It must have been difficult to tell "better uses" or worthy purposes from plunder while the wars raged, but one thing was certain: "it was as though nothing were sacred any more" (106).

Sommerville's epitaph introduces the second obvious answer to our question. The religion that gave early modern secularization "much of its impetus" was a Christianity for which no thing was sacred and, therefore, a different Christianity from the one accustomed, after Constantine, to privilege and power. Sommerville refers to "a more spiritual and reflective religion," one that reportedly had no misgivings about relinquishing social role and political influence; the fewer the distractions, the more intense the reflection (179). The report borders on overstatement, yet coupling internalization and secularization makes some sense. In the sixteenth century, pressure to reform both Catholicism and then the religion of the first reformers often featured a repudiation of political compromise, religious formalism, and sacred object; no state, rite, or "thing" was sacred. Pressure to reform was, to different degrees, associated with a summons to probe the subject. The intent was to locate in personal experience the signs or assurances of election that would replace what had been repudiated, namely, the consolations of the confessional, trust in the community that formed around the sacraments, and confidence in the formidable material presence and political privilege of that community.

In England, the summons to subjectivity heard from the pulpits and detailed in devotional literature dovetailed with late Renaissance reflections on identity. John Winthrop's journal is an unforgettable early map of Calvinist inwardness; guilt and remorse kept Winthrop guessing about election and groping for the

assurances of God's love and clemency, assurances that he found, *mirabile dictu,* in the persistence of his guilt and remorse. For assurance ordinarily comes carpeted with arrogance. Arrogance leads to guilt. Guilt denotes God's unwillingness to allow the elect to remain unrepentant. Yet arrogance, the sin of pride, must be an indication of reprobation as well. Could assurance be an illusion? Decades before Winthrop gave his dilemma memorable expression, Philip Sidney's Astrophil picked apart the "self-deluding fictions" that constituted desire and subjectivity. Sidney and Winthrop agilely adjusted to uncertainty, but now, to some, they seem to have been deconstructing themselves or, at best, to have been fidgeting unproductively. Surprisingly, Sommerville has nothing to say on the matter, although Winthrop and Sidney are fine specimens of the "individualized faith"—the "heightened sense of the individual"—that, in his mind, signaled the passage from religious culture to religious faith (from devotion to deliberation) and the secularization of early modern England (166).[4]

Stachniewski's book concentrates on the apparent psychological cost of "individualized faith." It regards pastoral care as a kind of tyranny, and inward journeys as guided tours of hell planned by Calvinist theorists and moralists, commended by preachers, and conducted by pastors and pious autobiographers. Stachniewski writes elegantly about "Calvinist cruelties" and the "tentacles [Calvinism] could extend into an individual psyche" (1–10). Consolation was available, but the price *and* product was affliction. Theodore Beza was known for having elaborated Calvin's soteriology, for having specified the characteristics distinguishing the elect from the reprobate, ostensibly to put doubts to rest. But Stachniewski villifies Beza and his English disciples, notably the prolific William Perkins; they "certainly did not allay anxiety. They erected a structure for it to occupy" (26). In Sommerville's account, religion is on the run. It retreats or retires from the management of society to the manipulation of fears. Stachniewski finds Calvinism where Sommerville leaves it, "sometimes related to anxiety, depression, inadequacy, difficulties in self-completion, and social alienation" (180). In Stachniewski's

4 For Winthrop, see Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford, 1986), 244–254; for Sidney and "self-deluding fictions," Ronald Levao, *Renaissance Minds and their Fictions: Cusanus, Sidney, and Shakespeare* (Berkeley, 1985), 158–164, 179–180.

account, religion runs down the expressive arts, dragging Christopher Marlowe and John Donne, among others, into "the dark shadow of puritanism," leaving behind a literature composed "under the press and screw of the persecutory imagination" (46).

Nearly ten years ago, Bossy described the reformed faith as "asocial mysticism." He concluded that Catholic pietists prefigured the shift from social solidarity to private sentiment by emphasizing contrition rather than satisfaction in sacramental penance, but nothing in the later middle ages, he said, matched the run from social responsibility to self-discipline. Religion on that "run" was identifiably Protestant and early modern. Sommerville's fine book follows Bossy's line, although Sommerville adds the important observation that religion was chased from the public realm to the private. Stachniewski's arresting study of puritanism, Marlowe, Donne, Robert Burton, and John Bunyan extends the argument of Carey, his mentor, who reduced Calvinism to "ceaseless agonized introspection"—"a recipe for anguish"—insofar as internalized censures from an angry God guard the gateway to reconciliation and regeneration.[5] I am utterly unpersuaded that religion ran out when the Henricians growled, and then ran down the Elizabethan imagination once it acquired refuge from predatory Tudor secularity in some desolate spirituality. Nonetheless, one could not ask for better, more challenging conversation partners than Sommerville and Stachniewski. The former sweeps generalizations from works on politics, language, anthropology, architecture, theater, and iconology into a readable and unfailingly suggestive narrative. The latter knits theology and literary history into a fabric that can best be described as historical psychology.

Crossing the Channel, the focus of the discussion shifts from the pews to the pulpit. Delumeau published his monumental *Le péché et la peur* in 1983. It retrieves fragments of late medieval and early mdoern moral and sacramental theologies to show that both Catholics and Protestants practiced *la pastorale de la peur.* Delumeau explained that pastors could be tyrants on either side of the confessional divide, deploying, for instance, "the narrow gate" in Matthew (7:13) or "the narrow door" in Luke (13:24) to terrorize

5 John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985); John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (London, 1990; 2d ed.).

Christians with the twin prospects of death and punishment. Catholics left much of the work for confessors but urged on laymen both candor and self-scourging contrition. Calvinists issued self-help guides to godliness and pathways to a more perfect repentance with instructions on battering the heart and bruising the complacent conscience. Delumeau concludes that piety depended on *culpabilisation*.[6]

What Hawthorne once said about "established rank" applies equally well to the reputations of Delumeau's research and conclusion: "there is something so massive, stable, almost irresistibly imposing in their exterior presentment . . . that their very existence seems to give them a right to exist."[7] Fear now appears to have almost eclipsed forgiveness. It was once possible, even advisable, given the scholarly consensus, to read Donne's Holy Sonnets and to detect a flight from fear to comfort and assurance of pardon. Delumeau makes Donne an emblem for Elizabethan pessimism; Stachniewski catches only "the dominant mood of despair" (254).

Delumeau seems more authoritative when he stays a Channel away from the almost infinite interpretability of Donne's poetry and closer to continental confessionals and pulpits, but Taylor has just volunteered some telling reservations about the pulpit exploitation of fear, guilt, and shame. Referring specifically to the later middle ages, she asks whether the allegedly dreary decades actually amount to "an era of existential anguish" and promptly answers that "times had changed for the better. As the traumas of the fourteenth century gave way to the relative prosperity of the late fifteenth century, the tones of the sermons changed significantly, and not even the Lutheran crisis could revive the fatalistic mentality of an earlier time. Nor is there a great deal of support for the view that people found the demands of the late medieval church to be psychologically burdensome" (232).

Having combed printed collections of sermons, Taylor writes convincingly about their "tones," less so about auditors' burdens. Indeed, her reconstruction of the preachers' world—apprenticeships, models, scripturalism, and didactic purposes—is detailed

6 Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident, XIII^e–XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1983), 244–245, 315–316, 568.

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of Seven Gables* (New York, 1940), 24.

and tremendously useful. She comes to know the petty problems that left pawprints on pulpit exhortations: parishioners motivated by curiosity rather than conviction, disruptive chatter in the sanctuary, and those who came only to stare mindlessly at the ceiling. From Taylor, one gets the distinct impression that preachers were preoccupied more with getting and holding the attention of their flocks than with filling Christians with fear. She places that preoccupation in the context of an ongoing, unambiguous, deliberate reformation garrisoned by earnest priests and mendicants in France from 1460 to 1560. She started her work when *la pastorale de la peur,* disabling despair, and creeping or careening secularism constituted the rations of graduate study, a condition Sommerville and Stachniewski would perpetuate. She approached the sermons, expecting to find the grim and gloomy and, worse still, the dull. *Soldiers of Christ,* her revised dissertation, records her surprise. Her preachers were kinder than she anticipated to women and Jews. Their sermons reflected moral outrage and frustration but also "gentleness" and "humor"; their objective was to instruct, not intimidate (viii, 80).

Taylor suggests that schism, scarcity, and plague impelled fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century preachers to speak "of little else but the *malheur du temps*" (101). If so, she has documented a significant shift, but it would be misleading to imply that death, despair, and adversity became dramatically less pulpitable commodities than hope and moral improvement. Taylor edges scandalously close to that implication when, for example, she recoils from Jean Tisserand's terrifying eschatology or reduces fears and threats of damnation to "the backdrop" against which possibilities for salvation were emphasized. In the sermons preached by French Catholics and English Calvinists, optimism and pessimism are there for the picking because preachers were struggling to join a consoling soteriology to an Augustinian anthropology.

Gifford, an Essex preacher, tells us about that struggle. In 1594, he criticized Christians for associating fortitude with the courage of Hannibal or the gallantry of the great Alexander. "It is out of all doubt," he said, "that they had not in them the true fortitude." They were "held captive unto vanitie and sin," a captivity true fortitude could not survive. Revenge was an excellent example of the coarse action commonly considered fortitudinous, a consideration that proved to Gifford how easily "sturdie and

boisterous roughnesse" might be mistaken for a virtue. "True" and virtuous fortitude was submission to God's will rather than a characteristic or quality of willfulness. But Catholics and Calvinists alike who accepted Augustine as their standardbearer knew that in captivity "unto vanitie and sin," the human will was almost indomitably willful. As a precondition for submission, then, the will had to be broken and emancipated. Gifford and his contemporaries countenanced self-incrimination and self-torment. Fenton pressed Christians to "worke revenge upon [them]selves." Arrogance and assertiveness were among the early and expected casualties. The desired consequence was a readiness comparable to Hamlet's in the last act.[8]

We learn more about optimism and pessimism from this summary of Gifford's comments than the fact that they are, respectively, identified with submission and self-reliance. Optimism meant that, captivity notwithstanding, consolation came with a readiness to submit to God's will in the world. Readiness did not run from responsibility any more than Hamlet ran from Claudius and Laertes. Although the influence of the institutional churches waned, Calvinism did not concede the social world to secularism. If Christians could not be perfectly virtuous, they could and must at least be resourcefully virtuous, resanctifying daily activity. Bossy tended to forget that; Sommerville cannot, because he carries his story to seventeenth-century millenarianism which, contrary to what one might guess, "was not a sign of alienation from English society but rather of involvement in it" (175). The foremost signs of resanctification, however, were less spectacular, namely, the Tudor Calvinists' countless instructions to inventory each day's doings, blessings, and shortcomings as if one were recording a constant conversation with God. We learn about the provisional nature of pessimism. It was the contrite Calvinists' route to readiness and submission, less a spiritual state than a spiritual exercise. Ruthless depreciation of the human will retrieved it from captivity. Nonetheless, the grim directions for self-scourging seemed so emphatic to Carey and then to Stachniewski that their "Calvinisms" looked like incurable melancholia.

8 George Gifford, *A Treatise of True Fortitude* (London, 1594), B3^{v}–B5^{v}; Roger Fenton, *A Perfume against the noysome pestilence prescribed by Moses unto Aaron* (London, 1603), B7^{v}–B8^{r}; William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* 5.2.211.

Indeed, Stachniewski is impatient with Robert Burton, his consultant, for making "encouraging noises" instead of condemning Calvinism as the central cause of early modern dis-ease (246). But Burton, in the seventeenth century, was only subscribing to received medical and pastoral opinion. Confronted with the "exceeding sadness" of their coreligionists, the "spiritual physicians" of the Elizabethan era did not presume a physiological explanation. The symptom might mean a "muddie humour" had settled in the spleen, but the condition could very well be part of "the soul's proper anguish," "proper" and soterially promising because it leads to repentance and assurance of pardon.[9]

With Sommerville and Stachniewski in the stalls, generative conversations about English Calvinist practical divinity are far more likely; its influences on private life, public policy, and the arts specifically invite reappraisal. But we need more street-level work to correct or complement impressions of secularization and *culpabilisation* drawn from aerial views. We need, that is, more that resembles the work on French Catholic "practical theology" that Taylor set alongside Delumeau's generalization. Unquestionably, at street level, one sometimes misses or misapprehends trajectories, as, I would argue, Taylor misses the crises for religious conservatism after Bourges (1438) and Bologna (1516).[10]

But there are many compensations. Close inspection of indefatigable pastors and their nearly interminable sermons is critical if we wish to appreciate the leverage achieved by rival theologies and political theories. For generations of Christians on both sides of the Channel, their "sillie base ministrie," as even its occasional critics admitted, was "the onelie thing that haldis down the power of sinne." "Take it away," Rollock continued, and "sinne sall cum to ane heicht."[11]

To some considerable extent, Sommerville is correct to insist that during the 1530s the church "lost its power, not only over the laity, but even over itself" (113). Yet Stachniewski's observation can by no means be summarily dismissed: Calvinism's

9 Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London, 1586), 193–198.

10 Marie-France Godfroy, "La prédicateur franciscain Thomas Illyricus à Toulouse," *Annales du Midi,* XCVII (1985), 111–114.

11 Robert Rollock, *Certaine sermons upon severall places of the epistles of Paul* (Edinburgh, 1599), 415–416.

"sillie base ministrie" exercised something of a tryanny over the souls of the faithful. To reconcile and recondition the best generalizations, it is ordinarily advisable to descend from the heights where, in this instance, the contours of secularization and *culpabilisation* have been suggestively mapped, trends and transitions imperceptible at street level beguilingly and usefully named.