

REVIEW

Practicing Faith in Early Modern Britain

Susan M. Cogan

Alec Ryrie

Being Protestant in Reformation Britain

OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013

XVI + 498 pages; ISBN: 9780199565726

IN THIS BOOK Alec Ryrie examines what it was like to be Protestant in post-Reformation Britain. Was Protestant religious practice a new breed of performance and ritual or a blend of old and new? In this ambitious work, Ryrie endeavors to unpack the implications of the lived experience of English and Scottish Protestants from 1530 to 1630. He wants to understand the mental and emotional worlds that shaped a Protestant's spiritual world, both internal behaviors and external expressions. More than just studying behavior, however, Ryrie hopes to discern the meaning Protestant believers found in their actions. His examination leads him to conclude that the similarities between English and Scottish Protestants, whether "hot" or moderate, mattered more than the differences. For Ryrie, "a broad, unified religious culture" (469) was the result of the Protestant Reformation in Britain.

Ryrie employs a generally synchronic narrative rather than charting change over time in the post-Reformation century. While acknowledging that differences are important, Ryrie seeks first to examine the constants in Protestant experience and practice. Refreshingly, Ryrie follows the view advanced by Debora Shuger and Isaac Stephens, among others, in seeing believers along a doctrinal continuum rather than occupying a fixed doctrinal location. He declines to place Protestants in boxes and usually refers to conformist and Puritan believers alike as simply "Protestant." To be sure, this strains the reader's comfort zone occasionally, since we are trained to inquire, "what *kind* of Protestant is this?" But this is an important part of the book's success: to drive the reader to think less in terms of categories and more in terms of the typical experience. And as Ryrie demonstrates, that experience was strikingly similar regardless of what kind of Protestant someone was.

Pp. 357–360. ©2014 by Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery. ISSN 0018-7895 | E-ISSN 1544-399X. All rights reserved. For permission to photocopy or reproduce article content, consult the University of California Press Rights and Permissions website, <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintInfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/hlq.2014.77.3.357.

This book is arranged into five parts. In part 1 Ryrie establishes the rich texture of Protestant emotions. In successive chapters, he delves into affection, despair, and salvation, mourning, desire, and joy. Throughout, we see these Protestants as anything but bland. Desire, for example, is the believer's yearning for holiness, for signs of God's grace. Joy, Ryrie points out, was conceived of not as happiness, but as "a settled inner peace in God," on one hand, and "sudden, transporting ecstasy" or a "stab of delight," on the other (80–82). In other words, joy could be both enduring and ephemeral. Part 2 is devoted to the examination of prayer among early modern Protestants: its meanings and practice, believers' struggles to pray adequately (or, sometimes, even to pray at all), and beliefs about answer to prayer. This is by far the longest section of the book and, at nearly 150 pages, could easily be a book in its own right. Yet given the centrality of different forms of prayer to Protestant devotional life, the length seems appropriate. Part 3 explores the importance of reading for men, women, and even children, and of devotional writing for men and women. Literacy, fueled by a new ethic on education, was an important part of the Protestant experience, but as Ryrie is careful to point out, illiteracy was not necessarily an impediment to zealous Protestantism. Part 4 investigates some—but explicitly not all—of the public forms of Protestant practice: communal (and therefore public) worship; the rituals associated with the sacrament of baptism; and household worship, which was itself a form of public performance of one's faith, particularly through the practice of table-graces, or prayers at mealtime. Ryrie concludes his work with a two-chapter section on the meaning and stages of life for Protestant believers.

Throughout the book, Ryrie provides fascinating detail on the continuities between Protestant and pre-Reformation practices. Habits that had traveled down the generations in family groups, such as the making of vows and ascetic practices, did not disappear with the advent of Protestantism. Instead, Protestants adapted these habits in ways that were palatable to reformed sensibilities. Eventually, even some practices that had been distinctly Catholic were transformed into something distinctly Protestant. Furthermore, as Ryrie makes clear, Protestants read Catholic devotional materials. The works of the Jesuits Robert Southwell and Robert Persons, for instance, enjoyed wide readership among Catholic and Protestant faithful alike, although in time they were edited to suit Protestant tastes. Pre-Reformation Catholic writings also enjoyed wide popularity among Protestants. The *Imitation of Christ*, for example, "crossed the Reformation barrier as if it did not exist" (288).

Ryrie relies on both print and manuscript sources. Sermons, devotional materials, treatises, diaries, and commonplace books provide a solid view into Protestant practice—what the faithful were expected to do and what they actually did. Yet as Ryrie admits, the sources are not perfect. They are the materials of the wealthy and educated, and are dominated by men, especially clergy. To be sure, we do have the voices of some women—Margaret Hoby, Grace Mildmay, and Elizabeth Isham are the most frequently cited—but again, these are the voices of the literate and wealthy elite. Ryrie does not examine here much of what ordinary people said or did in the

practice of their faith. Admittedly, to discover this would be like hunting for needles in haystacks, found largely in letters or perhaps legal records, and would probably mean sorting through vast amounts of material for rather incidental mentions. Still, this is a rich avenue for further inquiry even if it does not fall within the scope of this work.

This is an impressively strong book but, like the people it studies, not perfect. Ryrie possesses an impressive command of English-speaking Scottish and English individuals, but too often his Scottish examples are not identified as such, thus leaving readers to discern for themselves and rely mainly on nomenclature to do so. Furthermore, while Ryrie strikes a good balance between English and Scottish examples, comparisons between the two would have made clearer their similarities or differences. Similarly, it would be helpful if Ryrie more carefully distinguished between Protestant and Catholic writers. Scholars of the British and European Reformations will probably be familiar with the names and where certain individuals fell on the doctrinal spectrum, but some sections of this work might be confusing to readers coming from different disciplines or subspecialties, or for graduate students working to get up to speed on Reformation history. There are puzzling omissions of secondary references as well. Matthew Milner's work on the sensory experience of the Reformation and Jonathan Willis's work on post-Reformation church music, both of which are connected to the Protestant lived experience, are absent, and the section on martyrdom makes no mention of Brad Gregory's work on that topic.

As Ryrie comments in his conclusion, there is much yet to be done in uncovering the early modern Protestant experience. Ryrie's task here was to examine what it was like to be a certain type of Protestant. He has investigated conformist and Puritan Protestants, but intentionally not the separatists nor the Laudians. The experiences of those Protestants, and Catholics—of every type—remain to be investigated. Indeed, these are tantalizing areas of inquiry. What was it like to be Quaker, or part of the Family of Love, as opposed to being a conformist or reformed Protestant? There were differences, certainly, but what similarities might we find? Did these people pray differently? Read differently? Experience belief differently? We can ask the same questions about post-Reformation Catholic believers. Perhaps once we know enough about how early modern people practiced their faith, both privately and publicly, we can begin to understand the continuities that might have existed among all of these groups. We might learn that early modern religious practice, despite marked differences in doctrine, bore more similarities than we have heretofore realized. That, in turn, might tell us more than we currently know about early modern people and their society.

This is an extremely enjoyable book and an important one. Throughout, Ryrie is engaging, employing an easy conversational tone and supplying rich detail. As a result, this work should be just as accessible to students interested in religious history as it is to experts in the field. It will be valuable in teaching upper-level undergraduate courses and in graduate courses, and should be included on the reading lists of anyone wishing to specialize in early modern European religious history. Ryrie brings

these Protestants to life in such a way that the reader begins to comprehend who they were not only as believers, but also as people struggling to get it right and often fearing that they would never do so. There is still a lot of ground to cover before we fully understand the Protestant lived experience in the post-Reformation era. This is a significant contribution to that important conversation.

SUSAN M. COGAN is a lecturer in history at Utah State University. She researches the intersection of material culture, religious experience, and social context, particularly in the realm of religious persecution and coexistence. Her current book project is entitled “A Faithful Friend is a Strong Bulwark: Religious Coexistence and Patronage Networks in Early Modern England.”