

The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400 - c. 1580 by Eamon Duffy. 2d ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. Pp. xxxvii + 654. \$19.99 paperback.

When a volume bearing on today's crowded field of Reformation studies goes into a second edition a dozen years after its initial release, it is a clear indicator both that the book has been widely noticed and that it has stirred up lively comment. Duffy, the prolific Cambridge professor of the history of Christianity, and a Roman Catholic, is pleased to have achieved both.

376

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

In 1992, with the initial publication of *The Stripping of the Altars* (hereafter TSOA), he joined a rising swell of writers, working from his confessional standpoint, who argued that recent history writing about the Reformation in England had not done justice to the evidence that the old religion, Roman Catholicism, was deeply popular and embraced with widespread satisfaction by the population at large. All the indicators suggested strongly that at the level of popular religion, Catholicism was still the recipient of the gifts and bequests, the provider of rites, and the object of trust of the overwhelming majority of the English. While granting that the marital troubles of Henry VIII had indeed provided an occasion for a breach with Rome, he—with other writers sharing his confessional position—worked to demonstrate that the Reformation breach was unnatural and uncalled for from the standpoint of the “conservative majority” (xxxiv). From such a perspective, there was nothing inevitable about the embrace of the Reformation in England—with the usual persons and movements customarily deemed to demonstrate the antecedents of the Reformation era in fact representing no such thing.

377

Preparing a second edition (which differs from the first only by its extended preface), Duffy plainly savored the fact that this argument had been heard and extensively adopted. He notes with pleasure (xxxii) that an esteemed English Reformation historian, Patrick Collinson, has recently gone into print with the statement that Tudor England had changed after 1530 from being one of the most Catholic countries of Europe to being one of the most anti-Catholic. From such a position of apparent strength, Duffy in this second edition of TSOA feels chiefly the need to deal with those stragglers who have contested the adequacy of his 1992 depiction. The idea that agitation for church reform persisted in pre-Reformation England is one that has proved especially durable. He is particularly disdainful of those, led by David Aers, who have protested that the Duffy account—as depicted in the first edition of TSOA—has effectively “written victims of church and state brutality out of history” (xxii). This approach, Duffy insists, errs by awarding to fifteenth century heresy and error an exaggerated power of determining public religious policy.

To this reviewer, who can grant the substantial accuracy of Duffy's depiction of English satisfaction with the Catholic status quo prior to the dawn of the Reformation—without feeling that the rightness and eventual triumph of the Reformation are somehow undermined, the re-issue of TSOA does raise numerous questions. Chief among these is the inadequacy of the Duffy thesis to explain the residual degree of English anticlericalism from the age of Chaucer to the era of the Reform itself. Did the monarch prevail in securing his parliamentary divorce from Katherine of Aragon and an end to papal jurisdiction in England *simply* by threat? Calculating fox that he was, King Henry VIII perceived that he could prevail in the 1530s with his stealth campaign against chantries and small monasteries because of the population's suspicion of indolence and abuse within them. The same king calculated correctly that the rising gentry would purchase these church lands when put on the market in that

377

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

same decade and thereafter determine to hold them without any possibility of their reverting to the church. Advised by his shrewd chancellor, Cromwell, Henry gambled and won by authorizing the placement of vernacular Great Bibles in all parish churches by 1538. The demand for vernacular Scriptures was far from being met by the devotional materials circulated within Catholicism. All this to say that the Duffy argument in favor of the placidity of the Catholic majority of the population is unable to account for many important pieces of data. A very fine counterweight to the 1992 argument of Duffy (circulated once more in this second edition) was provided in the judicious treatment of Kenneth Hylson-Smith in *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation*, vol. 3 (SCM, 2001).

The value then of TSOA is that it does help to lay to rest some popular misconceptions about the coming of Reformation to England—as though inevitable and by popular demand. Such concept may fit a Lutheran Saxony much better than a Henrician England. What TSOA cannot adequately explain is how, with less violence utilized against residual Catholicism under the two combined monarchies of Edward and Elizabeth than was utilized against Protestants in the remarkably brief reign of Catholic half-sister Mary (1553-58) Protestantism increasingly took hold among a population that began the Tudor period as loyally Catholic as any Europeans of the time. The answer to this question seems to be that through some combination of self-interest, a desire for dynastic stability, and the threat of forcible invasion by European Catholic powers, England eventually took Protestantism to itself.

378

—Kenneth J. Stewart