Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition: Religion and Conflict in the Tudor Reformations

Review Number:
1377
Publish date:
Thursday, 14 February, 2013
Author:
Eamon Duffy
ISBN:
9781441181176
Date of Publication:
2012
Price:
£20.00
Pages:
256pp.
Publisher:
Bloomsbury
Publisher url:
Place of Publication:
London
Reviewer:
David J. Davis

In *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition*, Eamon Duffy has pulled together a collection of lectures and previously published essays from the last decade of his career into a single statement of Tudor religious culture. Few people understand and can communicate the nature of late medieval and early modern English religion with quite the same rigor and spirit as Duffy, which is why this volume deserves as wide an audience as possible. However, it is not without its shortcomings, as some of the chapters deliver much more than others.

Duffy first established himself as a leading British historian in the 90s with his book *Stripping of the Altars*, which he acknowledges was a ?self-consciously polemical book? (p. 4).&l(1) *Stripping of the Altars* put him at the forefront of English Reformation revisionist scholarship. Revisionist scholars challenged the prevailing notion of a triumphant reform movement that quickly swept across a grateful English nation longing to be rescued from the foreign authority of Rome, which was already eroding in cultural and spiritual potency before 1534. Instead, as Duffy argues here, they see the Reformation as something that

> dug a deep ditch, deep and dividing, between people and their religious past, and in its rejection of purgatory and of the cult of the saints, of prayer to and for the holy dead, it reduced Christianity to the mere company of the living. Overnight, a millennium of Christian splendour ? became alien territory, the dark ages of popery (p. 33).

While Duffy?s most recent instalment does not reach the heights of scholarly insight or polemical verve that *Stripping* delivered, nevertheless it is a significant instalment in his relentless campaign against the traditional view of the Reformation in England.

The 11 chapters address a wide range of topics. Duffy handles each deftly with his accomplished hand, and through it all, he weaves together a narrative of Catholic unity, pervasiveness, and persistence, depicting Catholicism as something that was fundamental to early modern English religion long after Elizabeth I ascended the throne. Taken together as the religious and cultural equivalent of so many different snapshots, the volume does serve as something of a family picture album, a historical collage commemorating both the highlights and the everyday happenings of English Catholic life in the early Reformation. Here, we are witnesses to pre-Reformation Catholic parishes taking special care of the iconography in their roodscreens, to the devotion and attention that parishioners like those at Salle Church (Norfolk) paid to the fixtures of their church, to the physical and material impact the iconoclasm under Edward VI had on different parishes, to certain ?neglected giants? of English Catholicism like Cardinals John Fisher and Reginald Pole, and to the prolific conservative voices like Myles Hogarde and Roger Edgeworth that filled important sections of Tudor print culture.

Amidst this variety, the volume presses upon the reader a singular purpose, to demonstrate that ?Hostility to the papacy was not the cause of the Reformation, it was one of its consequences? (p. 9). Traditional Reformation historiography portrayed the Reformation as a popular response to the claims the papacy was making on England and to the waning of the potency of late medieval religion. The Reformation, so this traditional narrative goes, was a revolt against the pope as a foreign power who was increasingly usurping the liberty of England by asserting his authority over the king and the people. Here, Duffy rehashes revisionist challenges to this traditional interpretation that were first asserted by Christopher Haigh and J .J. Scarisbrick several decades ago.(2) Perhaps this volume?s most significant contribution to Duffy?s view of the Reformation is its demonstration that the nascent national identity in early modern British culture was something more than a Protestant phenomenon. It is well known that Protestants employed arguments of English exceptionalism in order to oppose the papacy. Catholics, however, used similar arguments, which were based in a rich narrative of English pride and exclusivity to defend their theology of papal authority. Although Duffy warns, ?It would be anachronistic to speak of a nation state in the sixteenth century?, there is admittedly a significant amount of English exceptionalism that characterized both Protestant and Catholic narratives during the 16th-century reforms (p. 17). Hearkening back either to the missionary activities of Augustine of Canterbury or to the more legendary tales of King Lucius?s conversion in the second century, Catholic leaders in Tudor England celebrated ?God?s special regard and providential care for the English Church and nation?, as long as England remained loyal to the papacy (p. 26). They also pitched reformed thought as something that was foreign to English shores. For example, in his debates with William Tyndale in the early 1530s, Sir Thomas More set out the argument that the ?Reformation? rather than the papacy was ?an alien import? to the British Isles (p. 18). Whether it was coming out of Wittenberg or Geneva, Protestant reforms were identified as the equivalent of intellectual and spiritual invasions, encroaching upon the long-established alliance between Rome and Canterbury.

Duffy develops this line of argumentation in several of the chapters, particularly toward the end of the book, where he disputes the view held by some scholars that, after 1550, English Catholics began to devalue the importance of papal obedience to English religion, relegating it to second-class importance. Although Duffy argued this in a more substantial way in his book *Fires of Faith*, it is a point that is worth restating. In chapter nine of this volume, Duffy contests the view set out by scholars like Lucy Wooding that ?the return to papal obedience was an unwelcome irrelevance? to Catholics in Marian England (p. 199). This

interpretation Duffy mockingly refers to as the ?Bourne Supremacy?, in reference to Mary?s secretary of state Sir John Bourne who openly minimized the importance of papal supremacy. Granted, there is a certain level of indefensibility to Wooding?s position (as Duffy has demonstrated in *Fires of Faith* and now here), as Bourne was a minority voice at court. Duffy, however, is not satisfied with this. He is committed to not only eliminating any possible misunderstanding over the centrality of papal obedience during the Marian regime, but also demonstrating that ?Mary?s regime almost literally attached bells and whistles to the whole notion of papal authority? (p. 200). This celebration of papal authority and its significance to the English church is most evident in the career and activities of Reginald Pole as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1556 to 1558, to which Duffy devotes two of his chapters.

The most engaging and thoughtful moments in the book come with the analysis of the life and thought Cardinal John Fisher. All too often, Fisher is segregated to a second-tier position in Reformation historiography, overshadowed by Protestant adversaries like Thomas Cranmer, who Duffy describes as a ?lesser? adversary (p. 14). Duffy reminds us of the historical importance of this stalwart bishop who, alone among the English bishops, openly opposed the king?s efforts to divorce Katherine of Aragon. Fisher was the worst enemy of the divorce that Henry could have asked for. His piety was renowned, and his learning and acumen rivalled the best continental theologians. Whether the pope?s ?award of the Red Hat? of a cardinal, which he granted Fisher shortly before Henry condemned him to death, was actually ?the last straw? for the king or not, Fisher would die a traitor and martyr in June 1535, becoming the first of many victims of the religious conflicts in 16th-century England (p. 149).

Duffy develops this well-known narrative into a three-dimensional figure of a holy man who is too large to fit into the typical, stoic caricatures of his personality. Often remembered by Hans Holbien's deathly, spectral portrait of the aged bishop, the Fisher in *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition* is something of a welcome stranger. Duffy writes

> If he was a saint, he was no plaster saint ? but a lover of community, a cheerful host ? He was a man of the library, but not a solitary ? He had a sense of humour, even if it was sardonic and biting in the Yorkshire manner (pp. 149?150).

Like his fellow martyr Sir Thomas More, Fisher despised the corruption of the church, but he believed that only Catholic unity could provide a check on the covetous appetites of secular governments. Above all, as Duffy emphasizes, John Fisher remained loyal to the Roman church as the body of Christ, and all of his ecclesiastical efforts were directed toward to sustaining the catholic union of Christendom. The heart of Duffy?s analysis centres on how the example of Fisher highlights the complexity of the broader streams of late medieval religious thought. While he was a conservative theologian and scholar, he was known for his affinity for humanist learning and advocated for Greek and Hebrew at the universities. His traditional piety, which Duffy discusses at length in chapter seven, was neither mindless nor stodgy. He hated the blind abuse of Catholic practices as much as he hated heresy; however, for all of his love of unity, he never burned a heretic as the bishop of Rochester.

This look at Fisher is muddled somewhat by a dispute Duffy opens up over the differences between the academic labels ?medieval? and ?humanist?. The polemical tone of chapter seven seems entirely unnecessary, and I wonder why Duffy even engaged in it. He contests, ?Humanist and medieval religious ideals are not so readily or so starkly contrasted as has been assumed? (p. 152). This is a fair point, but Duffy?s use of C. S. Lewis as the initial point of attack ? because Lewis identified Fisher as a medieval thinker ? seems a bit unfair. After all it was Lewis in his inaugural lecture who argued that the medieval / Renaissance divide was almost entirely arbitrary outside the world of art.(3) It would have been nice to see Lewis receive some credit here, since he was one of the earliest scholars to suggest the kind of arbitrariness that Duffy is pointing to. Nevertheless, since Fisher does not fit into what Duffy describes as the ?Erasmian straightjacket? of ?humanist credentials?, he typically is relegated to the late medieval circles of piety and learning (p. 177). Duffy?s own analysis places Fisher?s spirituality securely in the tradition of the medieval

church, but Duffy advocates for a more complex view of humanist learning that can accommodate figures like Fisher who advanced the humanist *ad fontes* program but who did not share Erasmus?s disdain for religious institutions. Unfortunately, this complexity is easily overshadowed by the wrangling over labels, periodization, and the pedantic disputes of terminology that distract from Duffy?s otherwise enlightening chapter.

More significantly, the final chapter fails in many respects. Toying with Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 and its immortal phrase ?bare ruin'd choirs? as a metaphor to capture the spirit of Elizabethan and post-Reformation English religion, Duffy sets out a vision of Catholic significance after the reign of Queen Mary. If Duffy intended this chapter as a supplement for a strong conclusion, it is too speculative in its analysis. While Duffy points to the importance of several conservative and Catholic voices, we are given only snippets and never receive a clear, overarching vision of the place or role of Catholicism (or even conservative religious voices) in the religious landscape. Figures like the historian John Stowe, who chronicled the effects of reform on London's parishes, are insightful and exciting examples of how individuals adapted to this new religious universe without entirely embracing Protestantism. But the chapter does not fully address where these individuals fall in the religious landscape, nor does it engage much recent scholarship like Nicholas Tyacke and Kenneth Fincham's study of avant-garde conformists and other groups.(4) Finally, the chapter, almost whimsically, speculates about the bard himself, seeking to include him in this expanding cabal of conservative voices. Despite Duffy's disclaimer that he is not arguing ?that Shakespeare was a Catholic?, he does interpret Sonnet 73 as one that ?decisively aligns Shakespeare against the Reformation? (pp. 253, 250). Assuming this is true, that a single sonnet captures Shakespeare?s views of the Reformation, which is a grand and hasty assumption, Duffy does not propose what this means for the Stratford dramatist?s religious creed. Duffy?s argument is little more than a playful suggestion, based upon a single line in a single poem, but it is, in the end, more a scholarly flight-of-fancy than the kind of historical nuance we have come to expect from Duffy?s analysis. Moreover, it is a somewhat limp method of wrapping up the entire book, leaving readers with something much more akin to a sigh than a bang.

In the past, Duffy has been criticized for letting his own Catholic beliefs soak through his scholarship. I have found such commentary, usually accompanied by snide undertones, generally unhelpful and little more than *ad hominem* arguments. It seems to me that a more useful way of looking at it is that because of his beliefs Duffy is able to offer a more sympathetic and forceful account of English Catholicism. This he does better than most, which is best exemplified here in things like his studies of parish records and the life of Cardinal Fisher. As a result of the reforms that followed Henry VIII?s break with Rome, Duffy argues, ?another and different England was hammered into oblivion in those terrible years? (p. 51). *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition* offers readers a glimpse at what that different England looked like and how the people that mourned the loss of that England adapted to their new circumstances. It is unfortunate that the volume does not deliver a more coherent vision of the long-term shape and contours of those adaptations or a more conclusive summation of English Catholicism after the ascension of Elizabeth I. That said, Duffy?s excellent scholarship and penetrating insight are present in almost every chapter, and several of the chapters offer brilliant studies of the Catholic culture in England, making this volume an exciting and important contribution to the field.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400?1580* (London, 1992). Back to (1)
2. J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984); The English Reformation Revised, ed. Christopher Haigh (Cambridge, 1987); Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).Back to (2)
3. Clive Staples Lewis, *De Descriptione Temporum: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1955).Back to (3)
4. Kenneth Fincham and Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547?c.1700* (Oxford, 2008).Back to (4)

Other reviews:

Times Higher Education
http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp [2]
Guardian
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jul/27/saints-sacrilege-sedition-eamon-duffy-review [3]
historyextra.com
http://www.historyextra.com/book-review/saints-sacrilege-and-sedition-religion-and-conflict-tudor-reformations [4]
Independent
http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/saints-sacrilege-and-sedition-religion-and-conflict-in-the-tudor-reformations-by-eamon-duffy-7873059.html [5]
Tablet
http://m.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000311/booksandart [6]

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1377

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/49784
[2] http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=420986&sectioncode=26
[3] http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jul/27/saints-sacrilege-sedition-eamon-duffy-review
[4] http://www.historyextra.com/book-review/saints-sacrilege-and-sedition-religion-and-conflict-tudor-reformations
[5] http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/saints-sacrilege-and-sedition-religion-and-conflict-in-the-tudor-reformations-by-eamon-duffy-7873059.html
[6] http://m.thetablet.co.uk/issue/1000311/booksandart