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Monarchy and Religion: The Transformation of Royal Culture in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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This is the latest in a distinguished series of volumes resulting from international colloquia sponsored by the German Historical Institute in London. This one took place in 2002, and the printed proceedings bring together fifteen contributors addressing the theme for Germany, Great Britain, France, and Russia. The editor is well aware that the sample is far from exhaustive, and it is particularly regrettable, given the widespread influence of Spanish court paradigms, that there is no essay on Iberia. More regrettable still is the complete absence of illustrations. Much of the text is taken up with ceremonial and display, its significance conveyed by pages of the now-obligatory ?thick? description, but its impact could have been so much greater with some visual accompaniment. On the other hand, cost apart, might such a deployment of independent evidence have made some of the more extravagant analyses harder to establish?

The collection covers three broad themes. Part I, ?Religion at Court: Personnel? studies the presence of the clergy around monarchs. It emerges as surprisingly poorly documented, especially at the Austrian and Russian courts surveyed respectively by Derek Beales and Paul Bushkovitch. Both authors offer conclusions largely from inference. Nevertheless Beales?s is the most distinguished essay in the whole collection,

beginning with a brilliant and thought-provoking definition of what a court was: a symbol or a fiction, a place, an activity, a set of people, a unit of jurisdiction. Within this template he then displays a dazzling acquaintance with sources on the most complex of all courts, based on a lifetime?s study. Sermons are the main evidence for clerics at court in Russia, and although their declining influence is convincingly demonstrated by Bushkovitch, the decline was far less precipitate than at the courts of the first two British Georges studied by Stephen Taylor. Declining too was the influence of the confessors to French kings, whose changing images are reviewed by Nicole Reinhardt. Their eighteenth-century role seems to have been minimal, and even that of the two much-execrated confessors to Louis XIV appears to have been greatly exaggerated by ill-disposed contemporaries. Only in the court of the exiled Stuarts, presented by Edward Gregg, did the clergy retain, if not increase, their prominence. But then the Pretenders, as they were themselves well aware, had no meaningful identity without the ostentatious Catholic piety which led the last of them to give up his slender hopes of a throne for a cardinal?s hat.

The rest of the volume is largely taken up with ceremonial and its meaning. Part II is devoted to everyday religious observances, beginning with Simon Dixon on the Russian court. Like Bushkovitch, he finds the decline of religious commitment under and after Peter I greatly overemphasized by previous historians. He prefers to see its character changing rather than shrinking as military achievements, worth celebrating as proofs of God?s providence, multiplied. Catherine II also needed to mask her usurpation from a foolishly irreverent husband by ostentatious commitment to Orthodoxy. The Wittelsbach electors of Bavaria, ruling a deeply pious population, needed no such incentives, but, as Ferdinand Kramer argues, the public commitment of the fragile dynasty to luxuriant religious observance helped to keep their subjects tolerant of increasing electoral interference in the institutional life of the church. And whereas declining religious commitment is often taken as the corollary of advancing Enlightenment, Clarissa Campbell-Orr contends that the regular rhythms of religious practice observed at the court of George III are evidence of the integration of an English version of Enlightenment into the confessional British state. She argues her case with an impressive range of reference and evidence, but fails to offer an entirely satisfactory explanation of why this ?personally tolerant? monarch refused to countenance Catholics in Parliament, sacrificing his most successful and reliable prime minister rather than do so. Before taking this stand, the king had consulted bishops?surely a strikingly late example of clerical power which adds to the overall picture presented in this collection of priestly influence more persistent than has usually been assumed. In France, indeed, only thirteen years before that, an archbishop had been the last chief minister of the ancien regime, and there were actually more clerical ministers during this century than in the preceding one, remembered for its great cardinal statesmen. France, the land (perhaps the only land?) of an Enlightenment defined above all by its anti-clericalism, was in fact, Gérard Sabatier reminds us, governed from a court whose religious rituals ?hardly changed throughout the eighteenth century?. And he concludes his guided tour through those rituals with a very welcome scepticism about the much-touted desacralization of the French monarchy. Much more plausibly he suggests that the very opposite may have taken place, a ?sacralization of the office of monarchy? (p. 280) reinforced by models of kingly power derived from antiquity.

This is not what Chantal Grell thinks, to judge from her piece which opens Part III: ?State Occasions?. She writes on the coronation of Louis XVI; but of the five contributions in this section four discuss funerals of monarchs, respectively those of Habsburg emperors (Mark Hengerer), Russian emperors and empresses (the late Lindsey Hughes), British monarchs (Michael Schaich), and the Prussian kings (Eckhart Hellmuth). Largely descriptive, what all these accounts show is that, however apparently tradition-bound, royal funerals were endlessly rechoreographed according to the circumstances of the times when death occurred. In the process, the wishes of the royal deceased played little part, even when (as in the case of Frederick the Great) they were set out in considerable detail and a tomb had actually been prepared. The wishes of the transient occupant of the throne, however great in life, counted for nothing in a ?theatrical production designed less to demonstrate mourning than the power of the ? crown? (Hellmuth, p. 458). None of these commentators on royal obsequies see any contradiction between religion and theatricality. For Chantal Grell, however, the theatrical quality of Louis XVI?s sacre made it a largely meaningless sham. Though she mentions the crowds overcome with emotion when the doors of Rheims cathedral were thrown open to reveal the young monarch crowned in majesty, and the 2,400 scrofula sufferers who turned up to receive the royal touch

unbestowed for thirty-seven years, still she insists that this coronation was an empty anachronism. The classical trappings with which the gothic cathedral was decked she considers to have debased the occasion with confusing messages. At the same time Louis XVI is condemned for insisting on taking the traditional jumble of oaths. There are distinct Jansenist overtones in her insistence that planned display, not to mention departures from older traditions, somehow cannot be authentic or sincere or accepted as such by those at whom they are directed. But coronations, like funerals, need to be adjusted, especially when they come so long after the last one. We in England will no doubt witness this problem a few years from now. Though explicitly intended by the pious young monarch as a public renewal of the crown?s commitment to religion, there is no convincing evidence that the sacre was designed, as Grell claims (p. 366), ?to reverse the process of desacralization which was affecting the monarchy?. As Hengerer notes in a different context on the very next page, ?secularization does not necessarily mean desacralization?.

The three main sections of the collection are preceded by two overviews. In a substantial introduction, Michael Schaich attempts to distil general conclusions, but too often a lack of consensus among the contributors leaves him sitting on the fence. Nobody has ever accused J. C. D. Clark of doing that, and in ?The re-enchantment of the world? Religion and monarchy in eighteenth century Europe? he takes the opportunity to remind us of what he has been preaching for a generation. Religion and its doctrines, he argues, were not taken seriously by the social-science oriented historians of the mid- twentieth century, and consequently they failed to take account of one of the mainsprings (indeed *the* mainspring, he almost seems to be claiming) of public life throughout the long eighteenth century. Adapting a famous formulation of Max Weber, by the ?re-enchantment of the world? he means the return of religion to centre stage of research and analysis. The turning point came, ?strangely, unexpectedly? (but doubtless not coincidentally!) in England in the early 1980s, at just about the time Clark was starting his own research career. Theological frameworks, he claims, began to replace the secularist perspectives of the ?Cambridge School? of the history of ideas, which he provocatively describes as a sort of theology in itself. The waspishness he once reserved for Marxists like Christopher Hill or Edward Thompson reappears here, but is also now deployed against such targets as Quentin Skinner and Keith Thomas, both damned with faint praise for not discerning the direction in which research was destined to go. So this collection is invoked as a vindication and a celebration of Clark?s own hitherto thinly-subscribed crusade. And now we learn that the crusade is not yet over. The footnotes proclaim the imminence of a new instalment, a book on *Providence, Chance and Destiny*, which will doubtless inimitably explore themes which occur in this collection, but are not consistently pursued by any of the contributors.

Not that Clark is wrong to feel vindicated. The overall message of this book is indeed that religion and its connections with monarchy remained vital over the long eighteenth century. The practice and interpretation of religion at court certainly changed, but it did not shrivel away as so many previous historians took for granted. And the Enlightenment-derived idea of desacralization, so far from being beyond dispute as the editor claims (p. 38), looks to have been a massive and unnecessary detour in our understanding of how eighteenth century monarchies and their courts functioned.

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