

REVIEW

The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions

John Coffey, ed. Volume I: The Post-Reformation Era, c. 1559 - c. 1689. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020. xxi + 519 pp. ISBN 13: 9780198702238. £127.50; \$165 (cloth)

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The last volume to be published in this major Oxford University Press five-book series covers the earliest chronological period, examining the origins and development of the Protestant Dissenting traditions up to the passage of the so-called Toleration Act in 1689. Things get off to a visually striking start on the dust-jacket—albeit sadly no doubt often removed from institutional copies. A detail is reproduced from *The Committee, Or Popery in Masquerade* (1680), a brilliantly vicious print illustrated to a design by the great hammer of Restoration nonconformity, Roger L'Estrange. A group of figures sit round a central table personifying various movements: Muggletonians, Ranters, Quakers, Anabaptists, Independents, Fifth Monarchists, and Adamites, with the ultra-controversial early Quaker leader James Naylor meriting a particular appearance. The central and largest figure stands for the Presbyterians—the most populous group. All appear beneath a banner alluding to the National Covenant (1638) and Solemn League and Covenant (1643): “BEHOLD WEE ARE A COVENANTING PEOPLE.” The way the picture is cropped for the cover of this book removes many of the political jibes and historical reminders that L'Estrange sought to sear into the minds of viewers during the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81). These were designed to promote his central obsession: that those Protestants outside the restored Church of England were king-killing republican radicals, whose activities and agendas primarily benefited those promoting “popery” since they divided the Protestant interest. It is unfortunate that this image—the only one in the whole book—is nowhere discussed in the text. Nevertheless, it immediately provides us with a sense of how central and controversial the basic fact of Protestant fragmentation was in early modern life, whether viewed in terms of religion, politics, or society.

Something so big, complex, and varied is necessarily extremely difficult to discuss—even in a book as long as this one. Oxford University Press's recent multi-volume series on the history of Anglicanism faced formidable organizational challenges, but to encompass a range of different dissenting traditions raises the bar enormously. Fortunately this intellectual Rubik's Cube is in the immensely competent editorial hands of John Coffey who has ranged widely—chronologically, thematically, and geographically—in his own scholarship, and so is extremely well placed to act as the impresario for this particular project. His Introduction sets out a core intellectual proposition: “This volume stresses the contingency of Dissent, as well as the fluidity of seventeenth-century denominational identities” (3). But Coffey is too good a historian meekly to surrender to a certain tendency in current scholarship endlessly to harp on themes of “hybridity” and an aversion to binary thinking. As he notes, “we are inclined to underplay the sheer intransigence of many post-Reformation Protestants” (21). This is obviously right, not just in the sense that L'Estrange was pretty rigid in his

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views, but also the internecine feuding that often bedeviled relations between different Dissenting communities, perhaps most notoriously the Baptists and the Quakers. Nevertheless, a degree of tension between Coffey's welcome emphasis on identifiable boundaries and exclusive identities, and the preoccupations of some contributors is evident. "Porous" is a very frequently used word, almost to the point of becoming wearisome when the book is read cover to cover (although this will probably not be the way most readers use it).

The twenty-one ensuing chapters are divided into four parts: Traditions within England; Traditions outside England; Dissent and the World; and Congregations and Living. Despite the opacity of the titles given to Parts 3 and 4, they are the best parts of the book, and some of the chapters are outstanding. In the sense that any modern academic book can justify its exorbitant price tag, this one is of great value to anyone interested in the history of early modern religion. Major academic presses receive a great deal of critical attention—often rightly—but Oxford University Press must be commended for backing three massive multi-volume projects on the history of different religious traditions: Anglicanism, Protestant Dissent, and the forthcoming account of Catholicism in Britain and Ireland. They really do have lasting scholarly value.

John Coffey's lengthy introduction ably establishes this volume's intellectual credentials. Often following Patrick Collinson, he frames the central issue in terms of the English Church's "identity crisis": the whole post-Reformation era was "a contentious struggle for the hearts of the English people and the soul of the Church of England" (5). Puritanism was "a dynamic expression of mainstream Reformed piety" (12). The upheavals of the seventeenth century nevertheless created acute tensions. On the one hand, Laudianism polarized matters to a critical extent, setting in train events that led to the Civil Wars, Interregnum, and then a narrow church settlement in 1660-62 triggering the ejection of large numbers of those who could not in good conscience conform. Coffey notes the tensions here well. On the one hand, he quotes both Richard Baxter and John Owen praising the Church of England, even into the later Stuart era, for its Reformed qualities and stature as a standard-bearer of European Protestantism. But he also emphasizes the growing polarization of Church and Dissent, marked not least by the failure of eight parliamentary bills for "comprehension" in the Restoration period. Coffey draws out the factors helping to create rival ecclesiastical identities, as well as delineating recent trends in scholarship. Overall, it is a *tour de force*, and will be of particular value for students looking to transcend individual reigns or moments in time, and to make sense of the "post-Reformation" as a whole.

Three subsequent chapters examine the Presbyterians, the largest group covered by this volume, in different periods of time. Polly Ha examines the Elizabethan and early Stuart years; Elliot Vernon the English revolution; and George Southcombe the Restoration. All emphasize the difficulties of accommodating Presbyterianism within the intellectual architecture of "dissenting traditions," since it was, overwhelmingly "a movement to reform the Church of England" (70). Only the harsh realities of political life during the Restoration "prepared Presbyterianism for the denominational moment" (85). Other groups were less ambivalent about the need to seek religious truth and communal worship outside the national church. Successive chapters deal with Congregationalists (Tim Cooper), Separatists and Baptists (Michael A.G. Haykin), and Quakers (Ariel Hessayon). Cooper and Haykin tend to offer accounts grounded within particular confessional historiographical traditions, and often stick to a quite "granular" approach that focuses on specific pastors or congregations. It is striking, for instance, that Haykin discusses the relations between the General Baptist Thomas Grantham and the Church of England vicar John Connould without reference to George Southcombe's resolutely non-denominational account of their debates and writings. Hessayon, on the other hand, criticizes much recent writing on Quaker history for drawing on "conceptually outmoded studies of the period for their historical framework" (143). At the same time, though, he demonstrates what a fine line there is between essays that seek to move beyond bland outlines of widely-known events and those that ride too many personal hobby-horses—in this case Quaker engagement with the writings of Jacob Boehme, and the Apocrypha. These accounts crowd out space for other more central issues, such as Quaker speech, dress, and deportment.

The second part of the volume includes a series of chapters that vary considerably in quality on different geographical areas. The internal complexities of the Dutch Republic and the American colonies prove difficult effectively to synthesize in chapters by Cory Cotter, Francis J. Bremer, and Andrew R. Murphy and Adrian Chastain Weimer. Bremer comes closest to broad thematic discussions (for New England), but otherwise we are presented with accounts that simply move from town or province A to B to C. This tends to be fact rich and analysis poor. The authors of summary accounts of Dissenters in Scotland (R. Scott Spurlock), Ireland (Crawford Gribben), and Wales (Lloyd Bowen) have slightly easier tasks because their territories are less extremely divided. But they each make the most of their opportunity with well-organized and chronologically comprehensive accounts of events. Each also manages consistently to relate the history of Dissenting traditions to wider historiographic discussions of early modern politics and society. These are exemplary essays in such a wide-ranging collection and will be of huge value for time-pressed students.

Part 3 addresses several aspects of “Dissent and the World”—though why these particular ones were chosen rather than others is not made especially clear. Happily, the four chapters—three by venerable figures in the field, the other by a mid-career scholar—are in different ways excellent. Bill Sheils packs a great deal into his limited space, reflecting on parochial realities in very different types of location—London, market towns, and rural areas. He stresses both the importance of changing governmental priorities for local relationships, and the extent to which the “religious landscape” looked very different after 1660 to what it had during the early seventeenth century (306). For her part, Jacqueline Rose—also a contributor to the *Oxford History of Anglicanism*—focuses on the role of the state. She offers a deft series of engagements with the wealth of recent scholarship, notably that of Mark Goldie and Alexandra Walsham, in order to argue that “Early modern England was neither a persecuting society nor a tolerant state, but a patchwork of them both” (320). Many of her comments could readily be adapted as tutorial prompts for discussion or exam questions, not least the claim that “early modern dissenters were less the victims of a newly developing state than agents complicit in its creation” (327). Bernard Capp offers a less thought provoking, but still perfectly competent, overview of “dissent empowered” during the mid-seventeenth-century Puritan revolution. Summarizing themes from his own earlier work, Capp stresses the extent to which intense competition in an emerging religious marketplace took up a great deal of ministers' time and energy, distracting them from pastoral responsibilities. Nevertheless, he cautions (rightly) against fixating on Puritans' obsessive concern that more reform was not achieved: their expectations and hopes were simply unrealistic. Finally, Neil Keeble offers, in effect, a masterly summary of his life's work: “The Print Culture of Early Nonconformity: From Martin Marprelate to *Reliquiae Baxterianae*.” He is predictably convincing in arguing—in terms that Luther would have understood—that the press was “nonconformity's great asset in its holy war with an unreformed church and an unregenerate state” (353). More profoundly, he goes on to state that “it was through print that the identities of the evolving denominations of Dissent were defined and defended” (359).

Yet it is probably the last section—“Congregations and Living”—that includes the greatest density of excellent material, stylishly discussed, and fully up-to-date historiographically. One hopes that students will not be deterred by the position of these essays in the book as a whole, or ignore them in favor of the seemingly more immediately useful chronological chapters. John Coffey's superb chapter on the Bible and theology emphasizes how learned many Dissenters were, contrary to the polemical stereotype of “mechanic” preachers so regularly invoked by their opponents. It is chastening to learn that during the 1650s, Oxford's Vice Chancellor John Owen, wrote around eight and a half million words across eighty books—productivity that his modern successors would wish to see across the collegiate university in the age of the Research Excellence Framework. Coffey also reminds general readers that another stereotype—that of Dissenting Protestants' spiritual lives being grim and harsh—falls well short of reality: “The appeal of Protestant communities... owed much to the emotional warmth of their biblical piety” (386).

Susan Hardman Moore and David Appleby focus in turn on “Worship and Sacraments” and “Sermons and Preaching.” Hardman Moore acknowledges the problem of writing about the

multitudinous forms of Dissenting piety and chooses to focus on the *Directory* of 1645 as “a consensus of mainstream reforming interests” (410). On balance this works relatively well, not least by making good use of the magnificent *Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly*, though the narrowing of focus is accentuated by some puzzling asides—was the revolution of 1688 really “Bloodless” (425)? Nevertheless, few would argue with her closing summary: “Dissenters matched an aesthetic of outward simplicity with the cultivation of inward intensity” (433). For his part, Appleby offers a very workmanlike and chronologically organized account of sermons and the “distinctive” (435) character of Dissenting preaching. Despite its power, influence, and undoubted impact, the vast preaching efforts of Dissenters had a highly ambivalent overall effect: “Preaching had produced not a clear trumpet call but a discordant cacophony that had confused and unsettled the population” (447).

Two final chapters turn from ideas and media to lived experiences within the Dissenting churches. Rachel Adcock addresses “Women and Gender,” and follows Hardman Moore in consciously narrowing a potentially huge topic; in her case by focusing on women in the post-1630 period “for reasons of space” (454). In the current, highly-politicized, scholarly landscape of gender studies there is certainly room for a pretty straight down the line account of the role of Dissent in a broader history of women's public opposition to oppression. The final chapter is a richer and deeper account of lay experiences more generally. Michael Davies, Anne Dunan-Page, and Joel Halcomb offer a vigorous account of “an experience centred in a revolutionary mode of church life radically different from that of the traditional parish in the episcopal Church of England” (473). Their footnotes are a veritable treasure trove of useful references. And the emphasis on neglected lay experiences, rather than the writings of well-known clergy, is hugely refreshing. They make an excellent case for the fundamental importance of recorded disciplinary cases for understanding lay Dissenters, not least by focusing attention on issues of personal appearance and public repentance. Bracingly, though, this is not a simple story of oppressive control: “the lay experience of Dissent was, first and foremost, profoundly one of empowerment” (474). This is a point of view that will challenge the preconceptions of many readers, especially younger more secular-minded ones in Britain and western Europe but is all the more welcome for that. Overall, Coffey and his collaborators provide a strong collection of essays that cover a lot of ground, albeit with varying levels of archival depth and historiographic sophistication. It is good that Davies, Dunan-Page, and Halcomb end things on such an intellectually exhilarating note—hopefully a portent of much more excellent work in the field still to come.

How to cite this article: Tapsell, G. The Post-Reformation Era, c. 1559 - c. 1689. *Milton Quarterly*, 00 (2024):1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/milt.12495>