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Religion and Women in Britain c. 1660-1760

SARAH APETREI AND HANNAH SMITH (EDS), 2014

Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate

217 pp., ISBN 978 14094 2197

In Sarah Apetrei and Hannah Smith's fine collection of essays by leading scholars, we find clear justification as to the need both to focus on the religious dimension of women's thinking and activism, and to consider this over the period 1660-1760. This volume has the same ambitions as works of recent years by Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (*Women, Gender and Enlightenment*), Karen O'Brien (*Women and Enlightenment*), and Apetrei's own *Women, Feminism and Religion* in exploring how the long eighteenth century's paradigmatic changes affected women. In particular, the recurring themes across the volume show the authors' concerns to demonstrate the public-centred spirit in which their subjects engaged with religious matters, and so are adapting or applying to women Jürgen Habermas's model of the public sphere that has had so much traction over the past decade.

Calling the essays in this volume a series of "windows", the editors ensure that what they open out is, to the extent possible within a nine-essay volume, pretty inclusive (p. 19). The articles included here run the gamut from Protestant dissent through Anglican High Church, to Continental Catholicism, and in so doing ensure both a European and British, rather than exclusively English, focus. This is only one of the ways that this volume thoughtfully maps out the topic, though it is not of negligible significance. More centrally still to the conceptualisation of this volume is the fact that it shows a broad historical sweep from the Restoration settlement through to the 1760s in terms of the "turn to religion" (p. 16). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, there is much here about the connection between Anglicanism and Tory party politics, between Dissenting and Whig identities, in drawing the contours of the later-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century. Where this volume takes the study of religion, especially in the middle chapters concerning 1680-1720, is intriguing. A good number of the essays provide detailed commentary on the development of notions of politeness and sociability, observations about the rise of the author, and explore debates that were either figuring or contesting the concept of essentialism. Such material shows how turn-of-the-century cultural and philosophical views were iterated in religious language. As the editors of the volume observe, the mapping of women's religious identity in relation to other cultural developments may shift the terms of the debate from "powerful female patrons or published women writers" to a wider variety of identities, because of the ubiquity of religion (p. 22).

Though not aiming to be a thorough-going survey of the long-eighteenth century, *Religion and Women in Britain's* ambition is clearly to construct a framework that others might later follow. From the earliest historical period, therefore, emerge Sarah Apetrei's comments on civil-war mysticism, such as Bohemism, plus Alison Searle's study of two early Restoration, dissenting, women writers (Margaret Charlton and Anne Wentworth).

Emma Major's essay, at the furthest historical point considered in this volume, looks at the model of femininity advanced in the letters of Catherine Talbot, indicating the friendship networks being constructed by this Christian writer. The essays have evidently been carefully chosen, if not exactly to be teleological, then at least to explain some of the steps leading from the 1650s to the 1760s, from religious dissent to Anglican piety. This framework may in time be the aspect of the book that will most be challenged, but, at this juncture, with the study of women's religiosity in this period still very much in its infancy, the map that is proposed here is welcome.

Where women like Mary Astell have long stood as representative, and indeed she figures in an engaging essay by William Kolbrenner, this volume offers a number of other women of note. Melinda Zook explores how Mary II opened her mind to churchmen and in so doing steered the church through an "age of danger", while Sarah Hutton analyses Damaris Masham's philosophical correspondence with John Locke and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (p. 115). Together, these two essays are indicative in particular of the latitudinarianism of the period. Meanwhile, Hannah Smith situates the work of playwright Susanna Centlivre in the context of her Whig contemporaries, detailing Centlivre's desire to demean High Church or Jacobite thinkers. These essays dissect the post-1688 period in such a way as to show the varying effect of religion on the life and thought of women. This diversity is further emphasised in the remaining two essays in the volume. In Claire Walker's essay on Carmelite nuns, the Jacobitism of these continental ex-patriots is carefully documented from material gleaned from convent records and denoted as "spiritual campaigns" (p. 86). Meanwhile, Alasdair Raffe's study of Scottish Presbyterianism and in particular the "small and little-known" Coat-Muir Folk, show that religiosity came in a range of guises beyond the luminaries like Astell and co existing at a community level (p. 73).

This volume to a very great extent achieves what it sets out to, responding to wider scholarship's "apparent lack of concern for the placement of women within these [historical] narratives" with nuanced case-studies. The chief virtue of Apetrei and Smith's approach is that it reveals that religion in this period is not narrowly didactic or pious. As Apetrei and Smith propose "the Church seemed to be increasingly under siege and the culture of British Christians was being transformed by Enlightenment discourses ... by encounters with other world religions; by political responses to two Protestant revolutions; by urbanization and the vibrant public sphere" (p. 2). While ultimately, this study's placing of women in this transformative period is merely a starting point, it will still be a valuable prompt for further study.

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