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Popular Piety in Late Medieval England: The Diocese of Salisbury 1250-1550 [Book Review]

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Brown, Andrew D. *Popular Piety in Late Medieval England. The Diocese of Salisbury 1250-1550*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. 297 pp.

Although old prejudices have begun to be supplanted by a new spirit of historical ecumenism, much recent historiography on the English Reformation still tends to fall into one of two camps: either the Protestant “Whig” interpretation or the Catholic “revisionist” perspective. A refreshing exception is seen in the work of Andrew Brown who rises above the fray of confessionally-informed historical scholarship in his new monograph on “popular religion” during the late medieval and early Tudor periods. In describing lay religious life in the old diocese of Salisbury (comprising the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire and Berkshire until the episcopate was reorganized in 1546), Brown gives equal attention to the continuing appeal of traditional patterns of religious life and to the vitality of religious dissent in the form of Lollardy. He concludes that the followers of Wyclif, in this region at least, continued to practice a coherent alternative form of religiosity which attracted significant numbers of adherents, especially in the cloth towns of the Thames valley and Cotswolds, throughout the fifteenth century and until the Reformation. Yet he also points out that it was in these same towns that a personal approach to religion along strictly orthodox lines was being pursued by many of the faithful.

Historians of confraternities will find that much of Brown’s book is concerned with lay religious institutions and pious benefaction, especially (but not exclusively) chapters 6 to 8: “Parish Fraternities and Craft Guilds,” “Guilds of Mayors and Burgesses,” and “Hospitals, Almshouses, and Charity.” The emphasis here is on the cathedral town of Salisbury in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, primarily because of the relative paucity of records from smaller towns and earlier periods. Yet significant treatment both of earlier examples and of other towns indicates Brown’s desire to provide a truly representative picture of how these organizations functioned more in concert than in conflict with the traditional parish structure in meeting the spiritual and social needs of lay society below the rank of the gentry. It also reveals the thoroughness of Brown’s scholarship in working with many unedited materials, much of which has never been studied before.

The text is enriched by useful maps and tables. The book does not contain any photographs which could have added much to Brown’s discussion of pious practice, which in this period was so profoundly grounded in material objects of devotion. Also, the book would have benefitted from a fuller treatment of religious drama, an important aspect of lay communal religion in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, mentioned only in passing.

Andrew Brown’s study of popular piety in the diocese of Salisbury from 1250 to 1550 constitutes a valuable contribution to our understanding of this fascinating topic. And his balanced approach to issues of religious conformity and dissent is deserving of both our admiration and emulation.

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