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Spring 2008

Religion and Culture in Early Modern Europe: 1500-1800 (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Roney, John B., "Religion and Culture in Early Modern Europe: 1500-1800 (Book Review)" (2008). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 79.

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Religion and Culture in Early Modern Europe: 1500-1800. By Kaspar von Greyerz. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 307pp. \$25.00

The title of this new book is broad indeed, and despite the more than 300 pages, it would be impossible to even survey this topic with the massive amount of material that modern scholarship has produced. Yet, von Greyerz's main purpose is to take this broad survey and apply some theoretical and comparative principles in order to begin to see what trends and helpful explanatory patterns emerge. In his view it is impossible to speak of either religion or culture without reference to the other, for he follows the commonly accepted idea that the practice of religion is a socially constructed phenomenon, without reducing truth claims. The main task of this book is to show the necessary interconnections between what historians have often defined as elite culture and popular culture. While some historians have stressed the great divide between a more highly educated and wealthy elite culture that developed in the Renaissance, based on more rational and scientific sensibilities, in contrast to popular culture filled with magic and superstition, Greyerz believes that elite and popular culture shared many basic values. In the end, any religious practices are a complex mixture of elite and popular cultures. For example, "alchemy (and thus also magical ideas) played an important role in the development of European sciences into the late seventeenth century." (p.22) In order to make these connections Greyerz has found that a study of both microhistory, with its concentration on specific cases and actions, and macrohistory, with its attention to the large-scale structural forces, will help us better understand the place of religion in culture.

One important issue in early modern Europe was the division of Christianity after the sixteenth-century Reformation. Confessionalization demonstrates how both elite and popular culture contributed to unity and diversity within developing nation-states. While the Catholic Church used catechism and Baroque displays of splendor and pageantry to attract followers,

many examples abound where at the micro-level a trans-confessional identity allowed for the interaction of Catholics and Protestants in common village activities, even shared places of worship. In this way Greyerz shows his central thesis: “religious experience in the early modern period was filtered in crucial ways through the priorities of daily life.” (125) Religion had to respond in a direct way to the vicissitudes and necessities of everyday life, and greatly depended on specific locations and times. The well-educated Jesuits became masters at harnessing popular belief in miracles for their missionary activities. Yet, on the other hand, magic had its limits if it transgressed the Church’s interests, as is borne out in the case of witchcraft. When the theory of the “witches’ Sabbath was used against individuals it was “a learned theory” (p.145) from elite culture and was used by both Catholic and Protestant leaders.

Beyond the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 confessional boundaries were more or less set, and the phenomenon of a more privatized religion can be seen. Greyerz underlines that privatization, however, does not necessary mean secularization. Many groups, such a Pietism or Jansenism, stood just outside of institutional control and responded to the social needs. But, it is a fact that the process of secularization is unmistakable, and scholars have asked to what extent the seeds were already sown in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to answer this Greyerz entitles his final chapter “The Self-Questioning of Early Modern Religiosity?” His analysis has discovered some factors within the practice and thinking of Christian groups he labels “internality,” yet many other factors outside of religion per se can be labeled under “externality.” Secularization was not a one-way street, for after the French Revolution many European states reorganized religious practices as a weapon against the forces of revolution that threatening national identity.

By John B. Roney, Sacred Heart University