Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Robert Whiting. *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xii, 302.

In *The Blind Devotion of the People* Robert Whiting argues that the English Reformation of the sixteenth century had religious significance for only a small number of people, and that, for the laity, it constituted, not a shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, but from religious commitment to religious passivity. Implicit in Whiting's thesis is that our understanding of the English Reformation is too much conditioned by the dominant religious and political events of the time, and by the polemical and apologetic literature produced by Catholic and Protestant writers alike. According to Whiting, there is considerable evidence in the architecture and art of parish churches, and in various kinds of official documents, to suggest that the intense devotionism of medieval Catholicism was replaced during the initial decades of the English Reformation by widespread indifference to Protestantism.

Whiting's research centres on South-Western England, notably Devon and Cornwall, which together constituted the single diocese of Exeter. While Whiting admits that his choice of area was influenced by the wealth of primary evidence available for the region, he also contends that the south west is characteristic of other areas remote from London and removed from the mainstream of political and religious life. As well, it contained a significant portion of the population of Tudor England – some 5%. The book is divided into two major parts. The first documents the decline of Catholic religious practices and organizations, and the second evaluates to what degree this decline is attributable to specific Protestant influences.

In Part I, Whiting distinguishes "dependent activities", such as the sacraments, in which the parishioner was reliant on the Church, from "independent activities," such as prayer, in which the clergy could be completely bypassed. Further, he contrasts "inclusive institutions," such as the parish church, in which the layperson actively participated, from "exclusive institutions," such as the priesthood, in which the layperson played no part.

In the case of "dependent activities," Whiting observes that both parish and individual investment in the equipment used for traditional Catholic rites continued throughout Henry VIII's reign, but that this activity significantly declined during the Protestant reign of Edward VI. Pointing to the scarcity of early Elizabethan Catholic altar vessels and vestments, Whiting argues that the widespread despolia-

tion of the accoutrements of Catholic ritual and sacrament was accepted with little objection, suggesting only a lukewarm commitment to their religious meaning. Significant is that, during the reign of Mary I, the very limited reintroduction of the Catholic rites indicated a decline in popular devotion that went beyond distinctions between Catholic and Protestant.

Whiting draws much the same conclusion from an examination of "independent activities." During the pre-Reformation period, for example, individuals invested heavily in the images and figures comprising the main focus of their prayers, notably the saints and the Virgin Mary. Beginning in Henry's reign, however, there was a significant decline in this kind of investment, as well as a general cessation of oblations to major cult figures. Again, destruction of these cult figures met with little resistance, and restoration during Mary's reign was limited.

Support for "inclusive institutions," such as parish churches and chapels, follows a similar pattern. Private lay donation allowed for considerable church construction during the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries, but, as the sixteenth-century progressed, such commitment seriously declined, as merchants and other important members of the laity grew more interested in building comfortable homes rather than churches. As for "exclusive institutions," such as the various religious orders, Whiting observes that, although these groups attracted a significant following well into the 1530's, by the middle of the decade, support was dropping, as indicated by the reduction of investment in religious houses, as well as increasing contempt for those in religious orders, and a general lack of respect for clerical and ecclesiastical discipline.

In examining the relationship of Protestantism to this decline of support, Whiting discusses how Protestant views on faith, purgatory, the Bible and the eucharist failed to replace Catholic ones. In particular, he notes that wills, although ceasing to express distinctive Catholic beliefs, did not voice any specific Protestant replacement. With respect to "non-spiritual" motivations, Whiting argues that English xenophobia had no more to do with hatred of the Spanish than with the fact that it was a Catholic nation, and that the desire to escape clerical moral restraints rather than belief in Calvinist theology motivated the rejection of the Catholic Church. Particularly persuasive is Whiting's discussion of Protestantism's failure to provide an effective counterpart to the role art, drama, and literature played in Catholic religious life. Protestantism might claim that Bible reading was central to worship, yet during the period 1520–69, not one of 398 wills indicated the possession of a Bible. More than this, the parish churches only rarely owned a Bible, thus eliminating the possibility of widespread Bible study. In this connection, preaching, although much heralded as a central feature of Protestant religious activity, made little impression on the south west, as congregational instruction was replaced by the recitation of standard homiletic texts that did little to inspire commitment to Protestant beliefs and practices. Finally, Whiting documents a number of other social and religious factors that suggest limited support for Protestantism. He notes a sharp decline in the commitment of children to the Catholic religion of their

parents, but no adoption of the new Protestant faith. Influential holders of local office, although in a position to impose either the old religion or the new one, generally chose to do neither.

Whiting's thesis – that the Reformation, at least during the sixteenth century, had little impact on the laity, and that it, in fact, encouraged religious indifference rather than change, is persuasively argued. Whiting draws from a wide-spectrum of sources, and, while each individually may not constitute overwhelming evidence to support his claim, the data drawn from all his sources is immensely persuasive. Asserting that one must be careful in drawing generalizations from one specific case, Whiting insists that detailed local research such as he conducted for the southwest must be carried out elsewhere in England if his thesis is to be confirmed for the English Reformation generally. On the basis of testatorial investment in religion, however, he tentatively suggests that what occurred in Devon and Cornwall may have occurred in other parts of England. He recognizes, moreover, that the decline of Catholicism and growth of Protestantism was radically different in urban centres than in relatively isolated rural areas such as the south west.

By his own admission, Whiting places himself in opposition to such scholars as A.G. Dickens and G.R. Elton, as well as C. Haigh and J. Scarsbrick. Whiting's book is significant, however, not only for suggesting a radically different view of the early Reformation in England, but also for establishing a new context for evaluating other explanations for the growth of Protestantism, and in particular Puritanism, in England. It may be argued that it was not the episcopacy which carried the Protestant message to the ordinary people at all, but the Puritans, who, with their preaching and simplified worship, managed to capture the attention of people who had largely lost interest in religion. If Patrick Collinson in *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967) is correct in observing that the Elizabethan Church was fundamentally conservative, then Whiting's observation that sixteenth-century Protestantism offered little in the way of a significant alternative to Catholicism is considerably strengthened. Thus the outspoken and radical changes demanded by the Puritans, not only with respect to worship, but also to church government, seems much more likely to have grasped people's attention. Whiting confirms, moreover, Haller's position that the Protestant age really took root and flourished in the seventeenth century, and makes clear the shortcomings of such works as M.M. Knappen's *Tudor Puritanism* (1939) and Patrick McGrath's *Papists and Puritans under Elizabeth I* (1967), which base our understanding of Protestantism in sixteenth-century England too much on the theological and polemical debate that did not touch the ordinary person.

No one should doubt Whiting's prodigious scholarship. If there is fault in the book, it is that, even after sixteen years of research, it still carries traces of having once been a doctoral dissertation. There is, for example, the obligatory introduction, which, in surveying the social, geographic, and economic circumstances of Devon and Cornwall, seems detached from the main thrust of the book. There is also a repetitiveness in Whiting's style, and he has the irritating habit of asking rhetorical

questions to link one part of his work to another. Finally, one wonders whether the book would be more readable with a little less detail, which in some cases could have been relegated to footnotes; certainly this would have smoothed out Whiting's argument, which at times gets lost in an avalanche of information. But given that Whiting has provided a significant viewpoint on the Reformation in England, these shortcomings may be largely ignored. The maps and charts included in the Appendix are interesting, and serve to summarize the vast quantities of data supplied in the main text.

DAVID W. ATKINSON, *University of Saskatchewan*

Richard L. DeMolen. *The Spirituality of Erasmus of Rotterdam*. Bibliotheca humanistica & reformatica, Vol. 40. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf Publishers, 1987. Pp. xviii, 224.

Richard DeMolen's *The Spirituality of Erasmus* is based on a series of articles published from 1969 to 1986. As with any collection of essays, those found in this volume are of uneven depth, somewhat repetitious, and occasionally stray from the main theme of the book. Chapter 4, for example, which quickly summarizes twenty of Erasmus' major works in an effort "to substantiate Erasmus' declaration that he offered the reading public only works that served to enhance learning and Christian piety" (p.70), contains less detail than the other chapters. Certain points established early on are reiterated in later essays, as Erasmus' intention "to write nothing which does not breathe the atmosphere either of praise of holy men or holiness itself" (p. 39), quoted in chapter three, is restated in chapter 4 (p. 71) and in chapter 5 (p. 125). Finally, chapter 6, Erasmus' views on childhood, written to counter the argument that the concept of childhood was not developed until the seventeenth century, clings only tenuously to the theme of Erasmus' spirituality.

Still, Professor DeMolen's point, that Erasmus underwent a religious transformation in the 1480s which influenced the whole of his later life, is clearly voiced in *The Spirituality of Erasmus*, which presents Erasmus' spirituality as a fulfilment rather than a development. The author states, "It was at Steyn that Erasmus vowed to write only of holy men and holiness itself. The accomplishment of his resolution was realized in the remaining years of his life and found expression in his pursuits of classical philology, biblical exegesis, children's textbooks, *spiritualia*, and patristics" (p. xv). DeMolen in this way counters Erika Rummel's proposition that Erasmus was converted from a philologist to a biblical scholar. DeMolen, furthermore, argues against Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle's contention that Erasmus' theological method of imitation had its roots in the pedagogy of classical rhetoric. For DeMolen, "Erasmus proposed a way of life rather than a method of learning" (p. 36).