

## BOOK REVIEW

**Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c1400-c1580*, Princeton NJ: Yale University Press, 1992, 654 pages.**

Popular piety in pre-Reformation England makes for interesting reading. The following examples are not untypical: Rogationtide processions to banish evil spirits from the parish, the reading of special gospel texts at various points, to ensure the fertility of the land, the lighting of candles, gospel passages as written charms, the cult of the saints, and the use of relics (St Dorothy's comb, St Edmund's nail clippings), etc. And then there were indulgences. The case of Roger Legh (d.1506) was but one of the more bizarre examples. To ensure intercession for his soul, he had arranged that whoever prayed at his tomb gained a pardon of 26,000 years and 26 days!

Clearly, the Reformation was an event, whose time had come. That is certainly the conventional view. The medieval church was about to collapse under the weight of superstition and corruption, and the time was ripe for reform.

Not so, claims Duffy, in his acclaimed book on the subject. The author cautions against judging such matters by modern standards. "To a 20th-century eye, this is clearly a form of sympathetic magic" (p. 286). Duffy addresses the issues involved in a much more-graduated manner.

On the one hand, he readily concedes both the danger, and the fact, of excesses. "That is not to suggest that all such invocations remained within the bounds, even of 15th-century orthodoxy" (p. 283). But that is not a justification for the summary dismissal of such devotional practices.

On the contrary, they should be seen, and judged, in terms of their wider context. Duffy does not discuss the possible non-Christian origins of some such practices. But he insists that, in their current form, they were nothing more than traditional orthodox teaching, finding expression in terms of popular piety. Applying his thesis to the popular incantations, which could

be so easily dismissed as pagan, Duffy says: “My point is simply that the rhetoric and rationale at work, in such incantations, cannot sensibly be called pagan, instead, they represent the appropriation, and adaptation, to lay needs, and anxieties of a range of sacred gestures and prayers, along lines essentially faithful to the pattern established within the liturgy itself. This is not paganism, but lay Christianity” (p. 283).

The second part of Duffy’s work is devoted to the Tudor reforms, which he subjects to some trenchant criticism. Basically, his thesis is that the Reformation does not live up to its name. By failing to take into account the vitality of contemporary religion, the reformers ended up suppressing legitimate expressions of belief, and thereby undermined what they set out to reform.

Others may judge the historical validity of Duffy’s thesis. But *The Stripping* makes a profound theological point, and serves as an object lesson for anyone engaged in the work of contextualisation. It serves as a criticism of the iconoclasm of much of past-missionary strategy. It serves as a caution against the too-facile use of words like “superstition”, “paganism”, etc. And it serves as a challenge to the missionary, to ensure that the planting of the seed of the gospel does not involve the supplanting of indigenous beliefs.

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