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Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England. By Peter Marshall. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; pp. xii + 344. Notes, bibliography, index. £25.00).

In the acknowledgements and introduction to his major new study of attitudes towards the dead in the English Reformation Peter Marshall thanks a particularly large body of scholars at work on the culture of death in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In the footsteps of Philippe Ariès an army of scholars of medieval and early modern England have illuminated the process of dying and the social and religious rituals and visual and literary culture of death, emphasising its centrality to early modern mentality and experience. This particular interest in the culture of death in England during the Early Modern period is, of course, sharpened by the preoccupation with the fate of the soul and the nature of the afterlife that was of overwhelming concern to men and women in pre and post Reformation England. The study of the culture of death allows historians of religious history to attempt to make connections between the blistering debates at the heart of Reformation theology over the nature of salvation and redemption and the reception of Reformation beliefs. It allows them similarly to examine the ways in which the message of Reformers shaped and was shaped by existing social relationships, cultural practices and mentalities. The most extensive and satisfactory treatment of the culture of death in Early Modern England to date is Ralph Houlbrooke's *Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480–1750*, but Claire Gittings, Nigel Llewellyn and David Cressy are a few of the other large names in this academic field.[1]

Joining this crowded and distinguished community with a major new work might be a daunting task, but Marshall's intellectual debts are accompanied by a well-founded certainty that his book offers new and important approach to the thanatology of the early modern period. The focus of his work is not the infinitely-studied culture of the rituals of the dying, but more sharply directed towards the perceptions of the dead themselves and the changing nature of beliefs about the dead and the afterlife in sixteenth and early seventeenth century England. In particular this is a work about purgatory and intercessory prayer: the eradication of purgatory from official doctrine and liturgy, and the new ways that the state of the dead was conceptualised in a world in which old theological certainties about the afterlife had been demolished. In this way Marshall's work complements that of Diarmaid MacCulloch, who similarly places the theology of purgatory at the centre of the story of the Reformation in England as in Europe.[2]

The period Marshall chooses to cover is instructive as to the broader nature of his project. He begins his survey with a description of the nature and importance of the doctrine of purgatory on the eve of the Reformation in England, ending (wisely) in the 1630s, in other words adopting the time frame now described by historians as the period of the 'long Reformation' in England.[3] He argues that the theology of

purgatory, so central to late medieval religious practice, was crucial in shaping the project and effectiveness of the early reformers in England. The abolition of this doctrine created a need to redefine beliefs about the afterlife, but this redefinition of beliefs was a process of negotiation between the theological certainties of reformers about the nature of salvation and the falseness of purgatory and intercessory prayer and the 'innate cultural conservatism of early modern English communities' (p. 310). Beliefs about purgatory were gradually replaced in popular consciousness, but they were replaced by other concepts about the dead that above all were formed by the profound concern of early modern men and women about the state of the deceased and the fate of loved ones and ancestors. Thus Marshall places his study of beliefs and the dead gently down in the minefield of Reformation historiography. He grapples with 'revisionist' and 'post-revisionist' assessments of the Reformation, problematic labels to describe the historiographical debate over the success with which the official Reformation turned Englishmen into Protestants.[4] Marshall surely allies himself with the latter; however he takes extreme pains to avoid placing himself in any particular camp, and he does not overtly seek to establish his own. Rather he aims to 'close the gap between revisionist approaches', and to draw a 'balanced and nuanced understanding of the terms under which the living and the dead continued to co-exist in post-Catholic society'. Balanced and nuanced' this work certainly is, and Marshall seems particularly keen to avoid controversy, stressing his absolute desire to take into account the views of all scholars, 'and to avoid suspicions of partisanship and special pleading' (pp. 5, 265).

The work is structured roughly into two parts, the first four chapters taking a chronological approach, outlining the nature of pre-Reformation beliefs in purgatory and the practice of intercessory prayer, and the attack and dismantling of traditional beliefs about the dead by reformers through the reigns of the Tudors and early Stuarts. The final three chapters are thematically structured, analysing concepts of the afterlife in their different manifestations after the Elizabethan Religious Settlement. In an accomplished book the first chapters are particularly satisfying. Marshall explains that concern for the state of the dead shaped all aspects of late medieval religious culture. He outlines with typical sensitivity ideas about the nature of purgatory itself, contrasting the distinct lack of official clarification of the doctrine with contemporary fixation with the grotesque punishments that awaited the dead, and the serious attempts made by medieval scholars to describe the structure and even the physical location of purgatory. He then attempts to relate theology to actual religious practice, as he does with success throughout the course of the book. Marshall explains the powerful hold of the doctrine of purgatory over the living, and the bewildering number of increasingly complex ways in which the deceased were remembered in prayers, masses, obits (annual masses for the dead), tombs, parochial bede-rolls (lists of benefactors and the bequests they had left) and chantries (priests appointed to say daily masses for individual souls).[5] Intercession for souls of the dead in purgatory invoked great financial and psychological investment, and here Marshall outlines an

important theme of this chapter and of the book in general: whilst agreeing with the richly drawn portrait of the vital culture of late medieval religion conjured by Eamon Duffy and other so-called 'revisionist' historians, he points to the aspects of the success of the doctrine of purgatory that made it particularly vulnerable to attack by reformers. The scarcity of scriptural justification of purgatory and the lack of official pronouncements on the doctrine made it easy to attack, whilst the burdensome financial demands of the doctrine would be exploited in particularly fruitful ways by early reformers. The centrality of purgatory and intercessory prayer for the dead in late medieval religious culture meant that calls for reform were particularly divisive, striking at the heart of late medieval religious practice and belief.

These claims are further expressed in Marshall's discussion of the debates about purgatory in Henrician and Edwardian England, which were a vital force that drove early Reformation debate and the strange nature of Henrician Reformation politics. In particular Marshall restates the importance of the consequences of the dissolution of the monasteries in attacking traditional beliefs about purgatory. In the Bishop's Book and in the even more reactionary King's Book the nature of purgatory was questioned if not condemned, which appears to reflect Henry's own engaged, and increasingly critical opinion of the doctrine.[6] In the realm of popular religious practice, deep uncertainty and confusion about official attitudes towards the doctrine is suggested by the evidence of the decline in bequests for masses for the dead in wills. The uncertainty about official attitudes was wiped away during the radical Reformation under Edward VI, when sweeping changes to liturgy were accompanied by widespread attacks on popular religious practice and church fabric, entailing the abolition of the variety of customs associated with prayer for the dead. The suppression of chantries, confraternities, bede-rolls, obits and the strange new burial service of the new vernacular liturgy (particularly that of 1552) was accompanied by sporadic attacks on the physical remains and monuments of the dead, which were thought to maintain belief in superstitious and false doctrine. Assessing reactions to Edwardian reforms is difficult. The attack on purgatory potentially dissolved the bonds of communal memory for neighbours and family, and threatened to endanger the souls of ancestors. Whilst bequests for masses fell dramatically, testators left increasing sums to charity, possibly a covert way of aiding their own souls in purgatory by good works. Yet the impact of the questioning of the doctrine or purgatory (but not the efficacy of intercessional prayer) is demonstrated by the important but ambivalent place it occupied in the Marian restoration of Catholicism. Whilst prayers for the dead and purgatory were incorporated into Marian doctrinal statements and the revival of Catholic ritual and practice, attempts to describe purgatory – a place and a state so significantly absent from scripture – were significantly absent in the writers of Marian devotional tracts.

Purgatory was, of course, abolished once again with the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, and the ascendant Protestant elite saw the eradication of the doctrine as

central to the reformation of the beliefs of the people. John Veron, prebendary of St Paul's, reflected a mood of optimistic zeal in the title of his pamphlet, *The Huntyng of Purgatory to the Death*. However, this pursuit proved to be a far slower and more elusive chase. Marshall paints a convincing if unsurprising account of the gradual erosion of customs and beliefs associated with intercessory prayer for the dead that took place throughout the Elizabethan period. Marshall follows several other eminent historians of late sixteenth century religious history when he confirms that his own research suggests that the 1580s were the decade in which the gradual process of the gradual process of the English Reformation can be said to have established something like a generally recognisable Protestant culture throughout most of England.[7] Of course the north of England was the particular exception, with complaints about 'superstitious prayinge for the dead' and attempts to stamp out such practices well into the seventeenth century (p. 135).

The second major theme of Marshall's book focuses on how Elizabethan and Jacobean Protestantism constructed its own attitudes towards the fate of the soul, the nuances of which Marshall handles with delicacy and command. He significantly and convincingly demonstrates that the attempt to structure the world of the dead in a Protestant religious framework was a feature of all the religious controversies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. The earliest church traditions had included prayer for the dead, a huge source of potential embarrassment for Protestant theologians. Protestant divines legitimised prayer for the dead as a pleasing demonstration of charity towards the deceased in commemoration and celebration of the resurrection. Reformers were aware that this distinction from intercessory prayer might not be particularly clear, and the issue was a source of vulnerability exploited by Catholic critics. Similarly charity to the memory of the dead shaped the justification for the continued use of ceremonies of burial and other forms of commemoration of death and the dead, but the order of burial in the Book of Common Prayer was consistently controversial throughout the period surveyed by Marshall. Early Puritans were worried that the liturgy suggested intercession for the soul of the departed. As the doctrine of the elect became the prominent and orthodox doctrine of the English church, this concern merged with hostility from Puritans that the service implied the certainty of the salvation of the deceased. Curiously another source of commemoration of the dead, the funeral sermon, that was to become such a feature of Puritan preaching strategies, was also an area of controversy amongst early critics of the Elizabethan church. Thomas Cartwright, the famous English Presbytarian, was not alone in his opinion that praise for the deceased during the funeral service would foster the erroneous belief that the destination of the soul could be affected by the agency of the living. However the utility of the funeral sermon in expounding right doctrine and presenting, usually through the example of the deceased, a pattern for godly living meant that this potentially difficult area of religious practice became the ultimate preserve of the loquacious Puritan. Anti-Calvinist divines of the early seventeenth century, however, revived an emphasis on prayer for the dead which

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appeared to be a softening of attitudes towards purgatory – in the perceptions of those hostile towards them – if not in reality.[8] In the 1640s, prayer for the dead, with its Laudian connotations, became associated with the dangerous specter of popery. The committee of divines appointed by the Lords to investigate abuses in the Church and the problems of the Book of Common Prayer turned once more to criticise the burial service, and its attitude towards the certainty of salvation. One minor criticism is that Marshall is not consistently clear in his distinction between the continual concern within the clerical establishment about the persistence of the theology of purgatory and intercessory prayer and the interrelated but slightly different anxiety about the rejection of the doctrine of predestination and election. The burial service itself was problematic because it seemed to symbolise a rejection of the latter, the suggestion that all men might be saved. This did not necessitate a belief in the existence of purgatory, or even the belief that the living could pray for the souls of the dead, although they could be connected.

The final sections of the work concentrate on 'popular' beliefs about the after-life, one could say the positive side of the attempt to build a picture of the place of the dead and their relationship with the living. The picture offered was not always a satisfactory one. A desire to envisage and maintain an emotional relationship with the dead meant that an increasingly diverse culture of thought and commemoration adapted Protestant theology to particularly persistent beliefs and demands. The doctrine of purgatory might have offered psychological security, a way of avoiding hell whilst acknowledging the inevitable sinfulness of the human condition. The stark destination of heaven or hell was countered by the strong desire of early modern men and women to imagine that the departed were safely in the bosom of Abraham. Marshall brilliantly explores the subtle ways in which in a pastoral context the difficult doctrine of election placed particular demands on the rhetorical dexterity and capacity for ambiguous interpretation exhibited by certain preachers. Despite the hostility of orthodox thought towards the notion of the reunion of familial and social relationships in heaven, similar ambivalence was displayed towards the nature of the afterlife for the saved. In many works of pastoral theology reunion with loved ones was expected, after death.

Belief about ghosts demonstrates many aspects of Marshall's earlier argument about the difficult and different concepts held of the afterlife. Early modern divines accepted that apparitions might be sent by the devil or God to fulfil some mischievous or providential purpose, but they necessarily condemned the notion that ghosts were that actual spirits of the dead. Yet the popular cases of ghost sightings unearthed by Marshall suggest that people genuinely thought that they had seen the spirits of the dead, an impossibility in a Protestant framework that allowed no communion of the living and dead.

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The final chapter of this rich and searching survey investigates the commemoration of the dead. Marshall suggests that this material should be read in comparison with the initial chapter describing the culture of the dead in the pre-Reformation church, so that the change in belief over the period of the Long Reformation that have been so subtly discussed in the middle sections can clearly be discerned. Marshall explains that the predominant attitude of pre and post Reformation religious culture was a concern not to be forgotten; that the instinct to remember the dead in a world without purgatory led to the articulation of different methods of commemoration and increasing diversification of religious culture in England. Historians have argued that the Protestant culture of commemoration replaced concern for the afterlife of the soul with the memory of earthly achievements, evident in the efflorescence of sermons, funeral monuments, epitaphs and other diverse forms of remembering the life of the deceased – in other words the secularization of the culture of the dead, and the replacement of the world of purgatory with a culture that celebrated individual achievement.[9] This is true only to a limited extent. As Marshall has already demonstrated the status of the departed was of profound importance, and the records of earthly life found in funeral sermons and epitaphs invariably point towards the pious achievements and qualities of the deceased. The English practice of burial in churchyards and churches was particularly unusual within the wider European context of the Reformed churches, which rejected the concept of burial itself as a sanctified process. However, Marshall demonstrates that even English puritans could accommodate themselves to the continuity of this traditional location of burial, viewing the proximity of the dead to places of worship as a *momento mori*, a continual remembrance of mortality. Again, the culture of English Protestantism in the early seventeenth century seems strikingly idiosyncratic and diverse.

It would be difficult to find fault with the general or indeed many of the particular arguments Marshall's work, and it is likely that he has succeeded in his aim, which appears to be to offend as few historians of early modern religious history as possible. Marshall is so careful and subtle and so keen to avoid any controversial generalisation that his achievement – the explanation of a significant cultural transformation – is all the more impressive. Marshall convincingly achieves his aim, which is to explain that the change in attitudes towards the dead over the period of the long sixteenth century can be described as a 'seismic event, a revolution of sensibilities', which altered public and private religious practice, ecclesiastical structure and forms of cultural expression (p. 309). He has established the centrality of beliefs about the dead to the history of the long Reformation, and has given a persuasive account of the protracted and compromised way in which beliefs were restructured by the interrelation of the priorities of 'people' and 'reformers'. Marshall has masterly control of the sources at his command, both primary and secondary. The backbone of his research is the printed literature of the period, the theological debates and sermons which he reads with considerable sensitivity. The work is not stuffed with extensive archival references, and they are fewer in the latter chapters of the book, but it is not weakened

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for that. Marshall displays extensive powers of synthesis with regard to the secondary literature, drawing extensively on specific aspects of the culture of the dead fruitfully into his broader narrative. For example one senses that Marshall's particular inclinations and strengths lie in the interpretation of theological and literary sources, his discussions of the visual culture of the dead drawn from the work of Nigel Llewellyn and others whom he gratefully acknowledges in text and footnotes. The book raises questions rather than criticisms. For instance Marshall occasionally makes insightful comparisons with the practice of the culture of Reformed churches abroad. In a book of this length there is no room for extensive comparison with non English practices but it would be interesting to test and evaluate Marshall's findings in a broader European context, in relation to other Reformed and even Catholic traditions. As this is a work that discusses physical memorials to the dead and emphasises the importance of visual culture, some illustrations would be a particularly welcome enhancement to the dense and sometimes demanding text, particularly as that chosen for the dust jacket is so compelling. It would be churlish, though, to end with a critical remark. This work is an impressive feat of scholarship and a significant contribution to Reformation historiography.

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NOTES:

[1] R. Houlbrooke*, Death, Religion and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), N. Llewellyn, *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in English Death Ritual c.1500-c.1800* (London: Reaktion in ass. with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1991) also B. Gordon and P. Marshall (eds.), *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

[2] D. MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 10-16.

[3] N. Tyacke (ed.), *England's Long Reformation 1500-1800* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

[4] The best discussion of the historiography is Peter Marshall, 'Introduction; in P. Marshall (ed.), *The Impact of the English Reformation 1500-1640* (London: Arnold, 1997).

[5] MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p. 12.

[6] See D. MacCulloch, 'Henry VIII and the Reformation of the Church' in MacCulloch (ed.) *The Reign of Henry VIII: Politics, Policy and Piety* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 159-180.

[7] Ibid., p. 133, P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Chance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. ix.

[8] Marshall prefers to describe them as 'avant-guard theologians', P. Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England*, p. 183. This is a modification of Peter Lake's label of 'avant-guard conformists', P. Lake, 'Lancelot Andrewes, John Buckeridge, and Avant-Guarde

Conformity at the Court of James I', in L. Levy-Peck, (ed.), *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991).

[9] See for example C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*, and C.J. Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 1992).