Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750 (review)

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of major concern to the businessmen that the authors discuss, because Venice was an unparalleled financial center for all of Europe.[2] Fifteenth-century Venice is not a part of the general history of European business that can be neglected, since the city figured prominently in both Western and Eastern Europe's trading networks.

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Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480–1750. By Ralph Houlbrooke (New York, Oxford University Press, 1998) 435 pp. $99.00

Houlbrooke's volume successfully narrates a social history of death in early modern England. He warns that the coverage is not comprehensive, excluding, for example, medical theory and practice, as well as a cultural history of popular beliefs. Yet, the breadth and depth of research are impressive.

Looking at social and religious practices from the late medieval period through the eighteenth century, Houlbrooke documents changes (and continuities) in what Ariès called "the ceremony of death" and "the ceremony of the funeral and mourning."[1] Unlike Ariès and Gittings, who emphasize eighteenth-century secular influences (individualism and the rise of intimate family relationships), Houlbrooke emphasizes the importance of the Reformation and the history of religious change.[2] The medieval Catholic Church maintained a "remarkably coherent, powerful and pervasive" set of beliefs and practices; the Reformation was a disruptive influence that led to alternative and pluralistic practices (381). In this conceptual scheme, the changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the end of intercessory rites for the deceased, the declining role of the clergy, and the growing emphasis on condolence and the rise of commemoration) are as significant as eighteenth-century innovations (secular attitudes toward will making, decline of hell as a religious theme, medical management of the deathbed, and desire for privacy).

Houlbrooke makes use of anthropological theory, most notably in his conclusion, and he is imaginative in the breadth of his sources. But his argument develops through a traditional, empirical approach. He constructs his conceptual scheme chapter by chapter, drawing upon documents and artifacts that grew richer in the early modern era with the advent of new "media" (printed sermons, increasing numbers of

2 Frederic C. Lane and Mueller, *Money and Banking in Medieval and Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore and London, 1985–) 2 v.

1 Philippe Ariès (trans. Patricia M. Ranum), *Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore, 1975), 104.

2 *Ibid.*, 65–66; Claire Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London, 1984), 102.

signed or marked wills, letters and diaries, elaborate coffins, inscribed monuments, poems, elegies, and obituaries).

In an early chapter about the hereafter, he finds "little firm evidence" that the official repudiation of purgatory "caused a serious or widespread psychic crisis" as "popular expectation widened the entrance to heaven" (54). Nonetheless, in succeeding chapters he suggests that the abolition of intercessory practices (prayers and charities), as well as curtailment of traditional rituals (abolition of extreme unction and limiting of communion), led to "a variety of Christian ways of dying," even as the concept of the good death endured (181). Among the Protestants, a Puritan model of godliness coexisted with a more traditional, priestly model. In both, the dying individual—whether man or woman—had increased opportunity to manage his deathbed and assert his faith and to exhort his family and friends. Only in the eighteenth century did the emphasis shift away from the deathbed: As the obituary replaced the printed sermon, "appraisal of the individual was increasingly concerned with the balance of the life as a whole" (219). Especially valuable is Houlbrooke's treatment of mourning, which establishes "fuller development of means of commemoration" (228). Testimonials (funeral sermons, monuments, and epitaphs) commemorating the dead served the emotional needs of the living and thereby replaced intercession for the souls of the deceased.

Like other theories of historical causation, Houlbrooke's thesis about the relationship between religious change and social practice cannot be definitively proven. This reviewer, however, finds the argument persuasive, given Houlbrooke's qualifications and the richness of his evidence.

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British Identities Before Nationalism: Ethnicity and Nationhood in the Atlantic World, 1600–1800. By Colin Kidd (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999) 302 pp. $59.95

With impressive erudition, Kidd examines the origins of ethnic identities, or to be more precise, historicizes the question of ethnic identity by showing the intellectual pressures exerted upon the Biblical account of human beginnings by the explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth century. While investigating the permutations of English, Irish, Scottish, and Anglo-American thinking about the postdeluvian diaspora of Noah's descendents in more detail than most readers would wish for, he succeeds in demonstrating the havoc wreaked upon a closed conceptual world when it is ripped apart by events.

As Kidd succinctly puts it, "the defense of Scripture was the primary concern of ethnic theology." Yet, his antiquarians attached their par-