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Christine Peters. *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England.* New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xv + 389 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-58062-5.

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Did Women Have a Reformation?

Thirty years ago, John Bossy famously declared that the English Reformation was not designed with women in mind.[1] In his view, the loss of women's functions in rituals, the criminalization of the cloister, and Protestantism's bibliocentric nature in an era of high levels of female illiteracy meant that the process of religious reform offered little to women. Although Bossy's work was by no means intended as a history of Catholic women, his passing comments are widely cited as evidence of the Reformation's negative impact on them. Furthermore, conventional wisdom holds that women mourned the absence of Mary and the female saints in the new religion (p. 1). Christine Peters's exhaustively researched book examines the same question, "How did the era of religious reform affect women?" However, Peters reaches markedly different conclusions. Deeming the view that the Reformation entailed a "loss" for women a "gross oversimplification" (p. 169), her analysis of the rise of Protestantism and its effect on both women and ideas of gender emphasizes continuity and downplays the novelty of Protestantism (p. 7). Peters argues that women did not experience the Reformation as a sea change. Rather, late medieval English parishioners already had developed forms of Christocentric piety that had much in common with later Protestantism. Christocentric devotion thus served as a comforting "bridge" in a time of spiritual ferment, enabling many Catholics to make a smooth transition to Protestantism (pp. 3-4).

Peters's focus on "patterns of piety" operates on two levels. The phrase refers both to her concern with devotional trends–such as Christocentric piety–and to her analysis of the importance of exemplars of superior moral conduct, who served as "patterns" suitable for late medieval and early modern Christians' emulation. Part 1 of the text addresses a variety of topics important to understanding the late medieval world: religious roles and choices, the Virgin Mary and Christocentric devotion, the saints, and Eve and the responsibility for sin. Part 2 ranges broadly across the Reformation era and discusses religious change; parish religion; the godly woman; the Virgin Mary and the saints; renewal of interest in the Old Testament; martyrs; Adam; and marriage. Of this lengthy list of topics, Peters's analyses of the roles of the Virgin Mary and the saints in both personal piety and parish life, and her discussion of marriage stand out as particularly provocative.

Peters argues that late medieval parishes already had begun to de-emphasize Mary and the female saints before the official process of religious reform even began. Thus the Reformation entailed no "loss" of these female figures of sanctity. Increasing late medieval focus on the adult Christ and His Passion changed views of the Virgin Mary, curtailing her intercessory powers, downplaying her maternal identity, and emphasizing her role as a witness to Jesus' suffering (pp. 4, 96, 62). Furthermore, Peters asserts that Mary retained a greater role in English Protestantism than typically is assumed, with Protestants redefining her importance as an exemplar rather than an intercessor. Peters's analyses of wills, churchwardens' accounts, and paintings on rood screens and church walls lead her to reject "biological essentialism," which assumes that women were more drawn to female saints and men to male ones (p. 97). She disputes the claim that the role of the female saints was a religious issue of special concern to women. Peters argues that in their roles as "pattern[s] for emulation" saints like Mary Magdalen who served "as representatives of the weaker vessel, offered the clearest way of visualising the possibility of the sanctification of ordinary mortals" (p. 128); such a message was not one "which could be read only by women" (p. 129). In her view, saints were "humanised" in the late middle ages and their roles as intercessors declined in significance while their roles as religious role models ("patterns of piety") increased in importance. Peters's interpretation of the late medieval cult of the saints differs sharply from that of Eamon Duffy, who portrays the

saints' intercessory powers as paramount to their significance and downplays their roles as exemplars (pp. 99, 102). In short, Peters argues that although Protestants rejected the abuse of the saints as "idols," they did not eschew the use of them as role models.

Like her arguments about the roles that Mary and the female saints played in the lives of late medieval and early modern women, Peters's views on "godly marriage" fly in the face of much conventional wisdom. She portrays the sexual politics of texts such as the clergyman William Gouge's well-known *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622) in a more positive light than many scholars might. Emphasizing reciprocity, Peters asserts "that the idea of wifely obedience or subjection was" significant in Puritan advice literature, "but that it could be understood in a way that was more acceptable and less one-sided than historians often assume. It does not need to be seen in terms of misogynistic oppression,... but rather as part of a balance of duties" (p. 326). Calling for "a more careful reading" of Gouge and similar writers, she argues that "although such authors defined authority in very gendered terms, they were much more open to the idea that characteristics of behaviour were not gendered" (p. 332).

For Peters, the writings of Gouge and his colleagues provide the final pieces of evidence necessary to argue that women did indeed have a Reformation. Like men, "their experience of it could be shaped by their gender roles; but as important in determining receptivity were the local and personal contours of catholic piety" (p. 169). In Peters's view, the surprising origins of this Reformation lay in the Christocentric emphasis of late medieval Catholicism, which "paradoxically ... in reducing the religious significance of gender, and in attaching it more closely to a view of general human frailty and propensity to sin, paved the way for a more subtle understanding of gender in the early modern period" (p. 349) and "defined the christian (and hence the laity) in female terms" (p. 348). Because early modern people assumed that women were "weaker vessels," "exemplary godly women became even more worthy of praise and emulation," a boon for Protestant Englishwomen (p. 197). Furthermore, the crucial role of the female Protestant martyrs "ameliorated" women's position in Protestantism (p. 292). Peters concludes that "the threat that protestantism would strengthen the discipline of patriarchy was therefore averted" (p. 348), a claim likely to evoke comment and critique from family historians.

This ambitious book is the product of a prodigious amount of research. Peters's sources include: funeral sermons, mystery plays, popular literature, ballads, wall paintings, stained glass, woodcut illustrations, church seating, embroidery, and girls' names. She is especially careful to take seriously the material culture of parish life. The text is filled with fascinating discussions of a variety of topics, notably early modern Protestants' interest in the apocryphal life of Susanna.

Three elements of Peters's work would benefit from further development. First, the use of the term "gender" needs to be theorized. Second, the study would have been enhanced by engagement with Frances Dolan's work on Catholicism and gender in seventeenth-century print culture.[2] Peters acknowledges that–given the influence of the Catholic Henrietta Maria–the 1630s were "an unusual period" (p. 242) in the history of English people's attitudes towards Mary, but she could have devoted more attention to how that era complicates her assessment of Mary's changing role in English religious culture. Finally, it is difficult to account persuasively for the existence of female recusancy through Peters's thought-provoking analysis of early modern women, gender, and religion. As she points out, one can explain the predominance of women on lists of recusants as an effect of Catholic families' legal strategies, because it was less risky for women to be presented for recusancy since they were held less accountable than men for their religious nonconformity. Peters further argues that "the fact that women are seen primarily as the tenacious defenders of catholicism rather than protestantism mainly reflects the fact that officially supported anti-catholicism lasted longer" (p. 156). But these assertions do not engage at the level of religious belief the question of why some women were (or became) recusants. If the appeal of Christocentric piety smoothed the path to reform for so many, why did others reject that path and risk persecution to do so?

Notes

[1]. John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1975), p. 158.

[2]. Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca, New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), particularly chapter 3, "The Command of Mary: Marian Devotion, Henrietta Maria's Intercessions, and Catholic Motherhood."

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