

H-Net Reviews

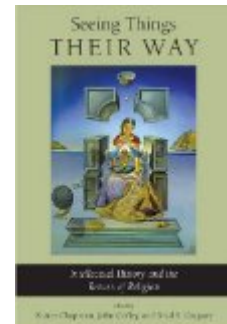
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alister Chapman, John Coffey, Brad S. Gregory, eds. *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009. vii + 267 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02298-3.

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Pious Thoughts: On the Practice of Religious and Intellectual History

It is hard to imagine a more powerful master narrative than the secularization thesis. Its basic argument is undeniable: compared even with the late eighteenth century, late twentieth-century Europe is a generally secular place. Moreover, by the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars working in a number of disciplines, from history and sociology to psychology and political science, started to take secularization as an established fact, resulting not only in a dearth of inquiries into matters religious, but a more general denial of religion's salience for understanding the modern world. Indeed, at least within the realm of knowledge production, academics helped make secularization real.

In the early 1970s, historians working in a number of subfields began pushing back against the secularization narrative, denouncing its excessively narrow understanding of "religious" and its misleading representation of the actual ebb and flow of religious change in the modern era. By calling attention to the innovations and shifts within the religious and ecclesiastical spheres, this research raised awareness of religion's continued vitality in modern times, while also yielding new appreciation for religion's important contributions to modern cultural, political, and social life. This said, the shadow that the secularization thesis has cast over scholarly understanding still lingers on in some areas. One major goal of the essays in *Seeing Things Their Way* lies in promoting the "return of religion" to another field: intellectual history. More boldly, the contributors suggest that intellectual

history methods can enrich our understanding of the religious past itself.

The key figure for this volume is Quentin Skinner. On the one hand, as John Coffey notes both in the introduction (written with Alister Chapman) and his own contribution dealing with early modern European political thought, Skinner exemplifies what is foul in the state of Denmark (or at least the fields of late medieval and early modern intellectual history). Namely, his approach to the political thinking of fifteenth-century Italy or seventeenth-century England, periods in which intellectual life was still profoundly shaped by religious ideas and practices, was exclusively secular. On the other hand, and somewhat ironically, the book's contributors identify Skinner's notion of "seeing things their way" as a means of overcoming not just the blindness of many intellectual historians towards religion, but also the equally deleterious tendency to view medieval and early modern religious ideas through analytical lenses crafted for and in other historical eras. We should, thus, take our subjects and their ideas seriously, and seek to comprehend them on their (rather than our) terms. Doing this, the authors collectively assert, will move the study of religious ideas from a peripheral to a central place on the early modern intellectual historian's agenda. At the same time, this historicist-contextual approach will promote better knowledge of the religious ideas themselves and their broader significance.

All in all, the ten essays in the collection (not counting the introduction) are well written and provide considerable food for thought for intellectual historians and early modernists. Many H-German readers, however, will find that the volume has little to offer them. In large part this reflects the subject matter of the individual essays. None of them focus on developments within German-speaking Europe, although four of the authors do touch on German matters. Brad S. Gregory explores what it would mean to “see things their way,” by examining the religious ideas of the sixteenth-century Flemish Anabaptist, Jacob de Roore. Howard Hotson’s essay on the links between Calvinist millenarian thinking and philo-Semitism discusses Lutheran, Calvinist, and Catholic conceptions of the “anti-Christ” to foreground the analysis of such millenarian writers as Johann Heinrich Alsted (of Nassau) and the English scholar Joseph Mede. A discussion of John Calvin stands at the center of Richard A. Muller’s reflections on the need for greater contextual analysis and interdisciplinarity in theological studies. Similarly, Willem J. van Asselt argues that careful attention to texts and their contexts reveals that the Reformed tradition of scholasticism worked with a distinctly premodern concept of history. Four of the remaining contributions deal almost exclusively with England (Anna Sapir Abulafia’s piece on Christian-Jewish disputational texts, Coffey’s bit on early modern English political thought, James E. Bradley’s essay on religious ideas in Enlightened England, and Alister Chapman’s musings on twentieth-century British religious history), and the fifth (by Mark A. Noll) treats methodological approaches to writing a theological history of the United States.

The other reason that many Germanists will likely find this collection of limited value relates to the essays’ substantive shortcomings. As a group, their purpose lies mainly in demonstrating what it might mean to follow Skinner’s admonition and how this might open up new perspectives in a particular field, whether that be sixteenth- and seventeenth-century millenarianism or early sixteenth-century Reformed thought. However, at the level of methodological reflection there is considerable overlap both among the essays and between them and the introduction, such that by the end of the volume the repeated references to Skinner and the need for context become redundant. One must also raise the question of how new this all really is. It may well be that intellectual historians still tend to marginalize religious ideas, even in patently religious eras. But as a number of the contributors point out, social and cultural historians have long ago adopted more contextually aware approaches

(Muller’s chapter, for instance, cites work of Heiko Oberman from the late 1960s). Both van Asselt and Chapman suggest that a Skinnerian approach will help escape the sins of reductionism that they claim have marred the accounts of religious history in the writings of social and cultural historians. And yet, one does the work of Heinz Schilling[1] and Callum Brown[2], to name just two of the historians cited in these essays, a severe injustice by contending that their writing on religion reduces doctrines to “social, economic, or political epiphenomena” (p. 168). I would contend that it is precisely their (and others’) efforts to move beyond the realm of religious thought and consider religious ideas, religious practices, and the interplay between them that have produced the findings underpinning the entire “religious turn” in historical writing on modern Europe. Finally, as David W. Bebbington cautions in his “Response” *cum* afterword, Skinner’s methodology has its own limitations. Not only does it assert a primacy of the political and, hence, privilege argumentative texts, but historians frequently do not have access to the type of evidence necessary to produce a “Skinnerian” reading of a work’s context.

The editors of *Seeing Things Their Way* deserve praise for bringing together such an interesting and learned collection of essays. But while they raise a number of important questions about the relationship between the history of ideas, theology, and social history, the programmatic nature of the discussions and the marginal consideration of German topics seriously reduce its importance for scholars of German-speaking Europe.

Notes

[1]. Van Asselt cites just one essay by Heinz Schilling, “Confessional Europe,” in *Handbook of European History, 1400-1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 1994-95), 2: 641-81.

[2]. In addition to Callum Brown’s important book, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), Chapman also refers to Brown’s articles, “The Secularisation Decade: What the 1960s Have Done to the Study of Religious History,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29-46, and “A Revisionist Approach to Religious Change,” in *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, ed. Steven Bruce (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 31-58.

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