

Joshua King. *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print.* Literature, Religion, and Postsecular Studies Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015. 352 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8142-5198-0.

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In *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print*, Joshua King illustrates how nineteenth-century Britons turned to the printed page to imagine themselves in Christian communities spanning their nation. King argues that the rapid growth of print culture and a voluntary religious market inspired vigorous efforts to form virtual national congregations of readers. By concentrating primarily on the work of Anglicans between the 1820s and 1890s, King begins by examining reading and educational programs promoted by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Frederick Denison Maurice, and Matthew Arnold. King then traces the emergence of John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827) as a catalyst for competing conceptions of a Christian nation united by private reading. This phenomenon, King argues, reveals both the composition and response of best-selling poetic cycles as diverse as Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and Christina Rossetti's *Verse* (1893).

The principal component of King's argument rests with his revision and extension of Benedict Anderson's influential conceptualization of nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. He intends to extend Anderson's account of the ways the spread of mass print media enabled modern national imagination. As King's comprehensive survey of essay collections, poetry volumes, and miscella-

neous periodical contributions makes clear, he agrees with Anderson about the role that print media played in the development of national communities. However, King splits with Anderson by resisting his "implication that imagining national communities is an essentially secular activity coordinated with the decay of religious forms of imagined community" (p. 4). From this, he builds on the recent work of such scholars as Stewart Brown, Hilary M. Carey, and William R. McKelvy, all of whom challenge traditional narratives of secularization and nationalism to stress the development of national consciousness, "as the secularizing successor of religion" (p. 5). Furthermore, while King sides with Anderson's assertion that national imagination is characterized by a sense of moving simultaneously with hosts of other citizens through secular time in a shared finite destiny, he believes that this is not of necessity closed to religious communal imagination or providential conceptions of history.

In part 1, "Apologists for Print-Mediated Spiritual Communities," encompassing chapters 1-3, King considers a series of middle-class authors, clergy, and educators who allied themselves with the Anglican Church: Coleridge, Maurice, and Arnold. He investigates their differing endeavors to promote reading strategies and educational

programs to help Britons transform the millions of texts circulating daily through their nation into mediums for imagining themselves in a united spiritual community. The opening two chapters concentrate on both Coleridge's and Maurice's efforts to endorse a reformed public sphere for a British national Christian community. Neither Coleridge nor Maurice thought readers and writers recognized transparent standards for the "public use of their reason" of the kind that Habermas has associated with the idea of the public sphere (p. 12). Instead, both men determined the source of consensus in the inner witness of God within the conscience, which each Briton could discover through methods of reflective reading. They differently sought to promote a spiritual republic of letters, a reformed public sphere, in which the nation's vast network of print would become a medium for imagining and participating in a fused Christian national community under a tolerant Anglican Church. In chapter 3, King contends that Arnold joined Coleridge and Maurice as a more heterodox apologist for the transformation of Britain's print network into a medium through which readers of all classes could imagine themselves in a Christian and national community. While Coleridge and Maurice shared many theological concerns, they shared few with Arnold. However, all three men did exert common anxiety over the rapid expansion of print culture and non-elite reading audience. This rapid expansion could be used to create, through reading, an imagined nation and Christian community in the minds of Britons. The arguments made by Coleridge, Maurice, and Arnold about a British spiritual republic of letters creates a space for the reception and continuous influence of Keble's *The Christian Year*.

In part 2, "Virtual Congregations and Printed Poetic Cycles," King begins by concentrating on Keble's *The Christian Year*, which brought Britons' reading back under the imaginative and moral discipline of the Anglican Church, an institution he regarded not as Protestant but as the

most authentic branch of the true Catholic Church. Keble's popular volume, however, ironically became a means for many inside and outside the Church of England to imagine a national Christian community that was sustained by private reading. Poets and critics, according to King, could represent private poetry reading as participation in a national Christian community. In chapters 5 and 6, King examines Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, exploring why the poem struck so many Victorians as a robust public testimony to a "minimum of faith," an intuitive belief in God and immortality lodged in the bedrock of the soul (p. 159). He claims that Tennyson perpetuated the spiritual reading community initiated by Keble, even as these later poetry volumes responded to and interacted with different social and cultural moments. Moving to the closing chapter, King explores Rossetti's *Verses*. He argues that Rossetti invited readers to imagine themselves in an ecumenical and global community of saints whose hope for citizenship in a resurrected nation under Christ would incentivize its members to acts of love and righteousness "even as it estranged them from total identification with any national society, branch of the Church, or reading audience" (p. 16). Rossetti, thus, created an updated Christian Year whose multidimensional language and structure were true to her Anglo-Catholic convictions even as they appealed to audiences sensitive to distinct modes of understanding poetry and Christianity. Just as many of the surveyed works were a catalyst for competing conceptions of a Christian nation united by private reading, King successfully unites scholarship on the devotional poetics of the Victorian era with fresh archival research. King concludes his book by highlighting the decline of print in the late nineteenth century and drawing on significant scholarship about the rise of new mediums in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as broadcasting and the Internet, in fashioning a revised national imagination.

Nestled within such a book is an excellent study of several interacting forces in British na-

tional life with an intensity unparalleled before or after. The emergence of a voluntary religious market alongside the proliferation of print meant that the latter became the dominant medium by which an increasing number of people charted their daily lives in secular time and imagined themselves in a national community that provided the contexts for their actions. *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print*, therefore, offers a thought-provoking analysis regarding how imagined religious and national communities relate to one another. King not only successfully depicts how Victorians crafted an imagined spiritual community through an ever-complex print market but also urges readers to consider how such phenomena “might also help us better engage the present world, in which a variety of religious faiths and their detractors aim for public influence on a national and global scale” (p. 17).

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