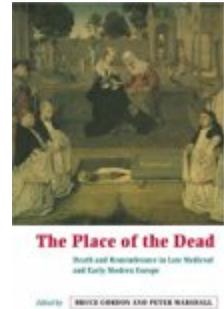


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bruce Gordon, Peter Marshall, eds. *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 324 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64518-8.

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The authors involved in producing *The Place of the Dead* have done us all a great service by providing an interesting array of articles that bridge at least three divides: chronological, methodological and geographical. First, the articles present a fairly complete view of the dead in European society from the late Middle Ages until the eighteenth century. Next, they present a good cross section of recent work in anthropology, history, theology, art history and literature. Finally, they have succeeded in providing excellent geographic coverage of the experience of the dead across the entire continent for the period in question.

Gordon and Marshall set out to provide us with studies that examine the place of the dead physically, spiritually, emotionally, socially and culturally. They remind us at the outset that the death rate circa 1500 was three times its present level and also that life expectancy was roughly half what one would find in the same region today. The implication is clear. The dead could not be ignored.

If there is a unitive element to most of these essays, it is the recurring interest in how the Reformation changed the relationship of your average citizen to their ancestral dead. Helt's article argues that the incredible array of research on late Medieval relations to the dead is in sharp contrast to the lack of such examination of the early modern experience (p. 189). His articles, along with many others here, show exciting new avenues of research into early modern practices of memorialization. The fundamental issue at stake was how to break people's view of the dead as nearby figures in need of communication and prayer from the living. Few issues were as difficult for reformers to confront as the place of the dead in a new religious setting. Will Coster's article on infant baptism

and death reminds us that one of the demands of English rebels in 1549 was a return to traditional practices of infant baptism to protect the child from damnation (p. 270).

The difficulties for reformers range from theological concern with the status of children who died without baptism (Coster) to a great concern for the placement of the dead in new religious communities (Harding, Roberts and Spicer). In Scotland, an architectural innovation, the burial aisle, represented a compromise between ministers adamant that no one be buried in the Church and the demands by local nobles that they be interred with their ancestors. Harding for Paris and Roberts for all of France, discuss the new difficulties of the division of communities from one shared cemetery to one for each religion. This included problems not only of families who converted to a new faith, but also to different practices of dealing with suicides, criminals, and others in each different religious tradition.

Vanessa Harding does an excellent job of describing the personalization of the dead in wealthier households compared to the depersonalization of the dead in poor families, destined for communal graves without markers. Her description of the practices pertaining to suicides, criminals and heretics are tantalizing but the reader is left wanting for more information on how exactly these groups were treated.

The dead in late Medieval Tuscany and Flanders, Cohn writes, had far less control over individual requests for disposition of their bodies than Burckhardt would like to admit. Instead, Cohn argues that families increasingly developed more control over artistic endeavors to commemorate family members and that there was no break to what Aries would call "a death of one's own" (p. 35).

Following the work of Eamon Duffy, Clive Burgess reminds us that the entire ritual base of Christianity is centered on death and resurrection, death was not one aspect of Christianity, it was the very center of everything to the faithful. Burgess does a thorough job of condensing his earlier research on the late medieval dead within this brief article. The recurring theme is that, in English parishes, the average parishioner left bequests and promoted commemorations of the dead in prayers, masses and art work without much imposition from above. The consequent argument here is that this rich Catholic relation with the dead was “emasculated” by the Reformation, which took away control of the commemoration from the churchwardens and parish patrons (p. 64).

Nancy Caciola’s article on possession posits that in local communities and families most people saw the dead in an intimate scale of dead saints and wandering ghosts, not so much in the church’s grand world view of demons and angels. Through vivid representations, Caciola shows how clerical condemnations that only demons can possess humans were met by parishioners. Lay members of these communities frequently felt that the possessed were more often inhabited by recently departed family and friends, not demons.

Martin Luther and other reformers confronted this same problem of dealing with ghosts and demons. Bruce Gordon finds Luther’s reaction to tales of ghosts as remarkably similar to Caciola’s picture of medieval Catholicism. Luther and other reformed leaders confronted tales of possession and apparitions by claiming they were angels and demons who were ultimately under the control of God (p. 100). He asserts that “Protestant writers of the sixteenth century essentially adopted in toto medieval angelology” (p. 105). In a recurring theme found in other articles in this volume, it was much eas-

ier to challenge Catholic theology on issues of death than to change the practices of the average congregation member. From Switzerland to Scotland, and England to France, many reformed congregation members still desired the closeness between living and dead found in medieval Catholicism.

This volume delivers on its promise of conceptualizing the place of the dead in many aspects of the world in the centuries around the Reformation. While the articles on medieval Europe are solid, they largely review or accept the work done on relationships between the living and the dead in earlier studies, some by the same authors in this collection. In its explorations of the Post-Reformation experience of the dead, this collection really hits its stride and provides a sample of new work being done to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the impact of the Reformation on relationships between the living and the dead. The editors should be particularly commended for providing broad geographic coverage, including important work on Eastern Europe, Switzerland and Spain.

Many of the articles discuss themes broader than their titles might indicate. Thus, many of these articles would lead to rich discussions in surveys of medieval Europe, The Reformations, or thematic discussions of social history. The fifteen articles are presented by well-established authors and are a bargain for the breadth and depth of knowledge they provide.

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