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Margaret Spufford, ed. *The World of Rural Dissenters, 1520-1725.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xx + 459 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-41061-8.

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This fine book is the the product of a group of scholars, all of whom are either former students of Research Professor Margaret Spufford of the Roehampton Institute in London or much influenced by her writings, the best known of which was *Contrasting Communities*, published in 1974. Professor Spufford contributes a better than 100 page essay, entitled "The Importance of Religion in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in England. Eight others follow, with a critical conclusion by Patrick Collinson, Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge. Such a richly textured and nuanced work could only be done in a country where the level of historical interest and sophistication is high, the scholars involved are known to and respected by each other, and where there is a press like Cambridge's willing to devote major resources to its publication. All involved richly deserve thanks and congratulations.

Frankly revisionist, *The World of Rural Dissenters* concentrates on some nine communities located in the Chilterns in Buckhamingshire, refers to others in Cambridgeshire and Hertforshire, and makes two main points. As Spufford phrases it, "what we are faced with is a variety of puritan and sectarian groups, formed of an infinite mix of different social and economic compositions" (p. 4) and "the dissenters themselves were integrated into their local communities in a way which we had not previously dreamt" (p. 37).

On the first, the authors demonstrate that religious convictions transcended economic and social class, centering neither in the lower orders nor on the upwardly mobile bourgeoisie–obviously not the latter, for the study looks at rural areas. They probably did not intend to do so, but the stress given to the fact that sectarian commitments sliced through class lines underscores the uniqueness of each person's religious experience to answer that one's needs as perceived by the individual. Since the authors seem unaware of this implication, they make nothing of it, but it suggests that even a rigorous examination of available sources–one of the basic strengths of the essays herein–can not finally explain something as ineffable as why a person was willing to associate with a dissenting group. In this sense, *The World of Rural Dissenters* ironically reminds readers of the limitations that a scientific approach to the past has.

(Although Professor Collinson recognizes this point–on page 391 he admits, somewhat reluctantly it seems, that "almost anyone could be a dissenter"–but he fails to wrestle with the clear implication that the intense individual reasons behind religious convictions cannot be quantified and totally ex-plained. Perhaps the gap opened by studies like this collection means that religious history will gain even more sophistication, one readily embracing techniques of the scientific approach but seeing people's religious experiences on their own terms.)

On their second point, the author take careful aim at the notion that dissenters were outsiders in their communities. Instead Derek Plumb emphasizes in his study of the Lollards in the Chilterns and Christopher Marsh in his very creative look at the Familists of Balsham that dissenters included substantial persons in the community. Indeed, Eric Carlson, in his essay on churchwardens–one somewhat less connected to the book's theme than the others–shows that Lollards practically monopolized the office in Steeple Bumstead. While this oddity might be explained by the tendency of Lollards to dissemble so as to remain in the established church, but what of those Familists who were churchwardens in Balsham in the late sixteenth century? It is clear that English religious life at the parish level was a complicated and convoluted reality, one not easily controlled from a center, be it Canterbury or a regional see.

Casting his net somewhat farther afield, to the shires of Bedford, Buckingham, Cambridge, Hertford, and Huntingdon, Bill Stevenson shows that after the Restoration Quakers and Baptists in these counties served in a variety of parish offices, especially as constables. His findings take specific exception to the assertions of

Christopher Hill that dissident Protestants broke sharply with traditional community life. Still a doubt nags, for the evidence Steveson adduces concerns a later period than the one when Quaker and Baptist dissenters first entruded themselves on placid parishes; local disgust with sectarian tactics, such as disrupting church services and even going naked through the streets, may have had time, in other words, to die down. More research is needed to tease out exactly how long harsh first reactions to, say, Quakers' confrontational tactics lingered.

Subordinate questions spin off these two broader themes like cheap pamphlets from a peddler of dissident literature in a seventeenth century's crowded marketplace. Spufford desires to emphasize the broad interest that religious questions possessed for average people, and she gainsays Keith Thomas and Eamon Duffy in their view that the lower orders go along without religion. And she sent Tessa Watt off to peep into the peddler's pack and reveal something of the wide array of cheap publications he carried; Michael Frearson then stresses that dissenters in Buckinghamshire were not isolated and provincial but tied into a national road network. Professor Spufford sums up with the remarkable Sister Sneesby, a deaf, Baptist widow and day laborer in Over, Cambridgeshire, who was convinced of Quakerism by READING their writing–whether distributed by peddlers we never learn.

Collinson has a fine time with some of the implications here. On the fact of centuries-long carryover of surnames in the Chiltern Hills, discovered by Nesta Evans and expanded by Peter Spufford to deal with mobility in much of England, Collinson inquires, "If religious convictions are inherited, . . . can we say that they remain convictions" (p.391)? Professor Spufford does not respond directly but gulps to entertain the possibility that one's theology may be genetically inherited (n. 75, p.23).

This is an excellent book, densely researched, congently presented, yet quite readable and informative. Any student dealing with the social background of religion in early modern England will have to come to terms with it. And we will all know more when they do.

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