

INTRODUCTION

Since the Enlightenment, historians and theorists of religion have often worked with a two-tiered model of Christianity, in which the pure belief and practice of the enlightened few was perceived as constantly under pressure and in danger of corruption or distortion from the grosser religion of the multitude. This imagined polarity between the sophisticated religion of the elite and the crude religion of the people at large underlay much Enlightenment historiography, most notably Gibbon's account of the early history of Christianity, and has remained potent in such influential twentieth century works as Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Even the future Cardinal Newman could contrast 'what has power to stir holy and refined souls' with the 'religion of the multitude' which he once described as 'ever vulgar and abnormal'. Newman, as more than one contributor to this volume shows, had in fact an acute sense of the value, even the normative value, of popular religious perceptions, but those implicit polarities and the historical condescension they encode have been recurrent and assertive ghosts, haunting the writing of religious history, in contrasts between official and unofficial religion, or those between clerical and lay, literate and illiterate, rich and poor, hierarchical and charismatic.

The 2004 conference of the Ecclesiastical History Society sought to question or at any rate to complicate these polarities by inviting exploration not of the divergence but of the interaction between elite and popular religious belief and practice. The theme, it needs to be noted, was 'Elite *and* popular religion', the two – to the extent that there are two – in tension or interaction, not one or the other in isolation. Contributors were invited to reflect on such areas as the relationship between ecclesiastical authority and popular religious practice, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, liturgy and paraliturgy, catechesis and its assimilation, and the relation between christianity and pagan survival or revival. The theme offered scope for study of the processes and effectiveness of cultural transmission in Christian history – the relations between 'high' and 'low', 'great' or 'little' religious culture(s), in books, music, pictures and architecture – and invited exploration of the historical relationships between religion and social status.

The resulting volume ranges from the baptismal customs of Visigoth

Spain, and Christian reworking of traditional Germanic heroic values in the monumental art of Anglo-Saxon England, down to the visual culture of American Evangelicalism, or the debate about the assimilation of 'pop' and 'light swing' music in twentieth-century Anglican liturgy. What emerges again and again in these case studies, varied as they are, is the unhelpfulness of any simple bi-polar characterisation of the complexities of religious experience and religious institutions and practice. Christianity – in its concrete forms of liturgy, pilgrimage, bible and holy book, indulgences – might be experienced in simple or sophisticated ways. But simplicity or sophistication was rarely the exclusive prerogative of a single easily characterised class of Christian. Neither 'superstition' nor 'heresy' have ever been by any means confined to the poor, the uneducated, or the lay. From its very beginnings pilgrimage might be undertaken as an exercise in sophisticated contemplative experience, or more robustly as a glorified tourist trip, in which souvenirs and spiritual benefits are gathered more or less indiscriminately. But these contrasting approaches to pilgrimage might be encountered at any level of society: the poor might be recollected and devout, the rich intent on souvenir hunting, and perhaps the majority of pilgrims have been both. As Robert Swanson argues below, the history of even so central (and ultimately so contested) a practice as the cult of indulgences, displays not 'a rigid barrier between learned and lewd, clerical and lay', but a religion 'in which such distinctions tend to evaporate'.

This is perhaps more obviously true of some forms of Christianity than of others. Protestantism has characteristically mobilised such polarities for polemical purposes, manipulating concepts of degeneration and reform, corruption and renewal. These are categories which could readily be assimilated to distinctions in religious knowledge or respectability, whereas, as Sheridan Gilley has argued, the 'vulgar piety of the Victorian Catholic Church was classless'. But Protestant Christianity too has always at any rate aspired to social inclusiveness, and has sought institutions and strategies to achieve such interaction. And in its evangelical forms, as David Morgan demonstrates here, it too 'has long thrived on a fluid exchange between high and low, elite and popular'. It is therefore our hope that the essays in this volume will contribute to the liberation of the writing of religious history from tempting polarities which obscure rather than illumine.

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