Patterns of Piety

This book offers a new interpretation of the transition from catholicism to protestantism in the English Reformation, and explores its implications for an understanding of women and gender. Central to this is an appreciation of the significance of medieval Christocentric piety in offering a bridge to the Reformation, and in shaping the nature of protestantism in the period up to the Civil War. Not only does this explain much of the support for protestantism, but it also suggests the need to question assumptions that the ‘loss’ of the Virgin Mary and the saints was detrimental to women.

Patterns of piety are crucial in two senses: devotional trends intersected with the ideas expressed in the lives of godly exemplars. The strength of the idea of the godly woman ensured that the outcome would shape the contemporary understanding of gender. The Reformation undermined the ritual role of the catholic godly woman, but its definition of the representative frail christian as a woman devoted to Christ meant that it was not an alien environment for the weaker sex. Moreover, although scriptural texts could reinforce patriarchy, they were complemented by subtle discussions of the ambiguities of gender and responsibility in the stories of Susanna and Bathsheba. The Christocentric piety of the late medieval parish shaped the Reformation and paved the way for a more subtle understanding of gender.

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Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History

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This is a series of monographs and studies covering many aspects of the history of the British Isles between the late fifteenth and the early eighteenth century. It includes the work of established scholars and pioneering work by a new generation of scholars. It includes both reviews and revisions of major topics and books, which open up new historical terrain or which reveal startling new perspectives on familiar subjects. All the volumes set detailed research into broader perspectives, and the books are intended for the use of students as well as of their teachers.

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In 1653, as she ventured into print, Margaret Cavendish noted that she had been urged to ‘let writing Books alone / For surely wiser Women never wrote one’ and to return to her sewing. In today’s society, the attractions of the needle may be less powerful, and the specific problems of female authorship less acute, than in the middle of the seventeenth century, but anyone who has attempted to convert ‘the thesis’ into ‘the book’ knows that such an undertaking can often seem far from wise. The acknowledgements of academic and personal support that follow are far from token.

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