

**Christian England, Volume 2, From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century, David L. Edwards** (London: William Collins, 1983), 526 pp., £4.95.

This volume is the second of a three-volume series in which Edwards plans to present a complete survey of the history of the Christian religion in England from its origins until the early twentieth century. The author, who is the Provost of Southwark Cathedral in London, has attempted here to write 'the first ecumenical history of English Christianity' (p. 11).

The first volume of *Christian England* (1981), deals with the Christian faith in England from the initial appearance of the Gospel in this land during the fourth century until the eve of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The second volume, *Christian England: From the Reformation to the Eighteenth Century*, begins with the Protestant movement in England during the 1540s, continues through the history of English Christianity in Tudor and Stuart England through the storms of the Protestant revolution under Henry VIII and Edward VI, the Catholic reaction during the reign of Queen Mary I

(Bloody Mary), the Protestant and Catholic objections to the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559, the Puritan explosion on both sides of the Atlantic during the seventeenth century, and concludes after the dramas of the religious struggle over the faith of the English nation had died down in the eighteenth century, to be replaced by a more 'reasonable' faith and the toleration of quieter dissenting congregations—Protestant or Catholic—alongside the established Church of England. The trilogy will be complete with the third volume dealing with Christianity in England from the mid-eighteenth century, the Evangelical and Catholic revivals, the Victorian religion, the worldwide expansion of missionary activities, and the impact of World War I.

The story of the Christian faith in England and particularly of the period of the Protestant Reformation and the Puritan Revolution under consideration here has, of course, been dealt with before in various studies and examined in detail. In this volume, however, written especially for students and lay readers rather than experts, Edwards has attempted to present the study of religion as a social and political phenomenon, with an emphasis on biography and some accounts of the greater writers of the period, theological or lay, whose thought expressed or moulded the age. And while claiming no originality, the outcome is indeed impressive: beautifully written, most interesting and highly readable, Edwards' book presents the history of Christianity in England from the Reformation to the eighteenth century as a constant struggle—sometimes, indeed, a violent struggle—for the soul of the English people.

The author, however, makes two central interpretive decisions that undermine the utility of *Christian England* as an acceptable account of the religious developments and transformations in the period concerned. In the first place, he consciously tends to minimise the vast differences between the Catholics on the one hand, and the Protestants and subsequently the Puritans, on the other. The author's declared aim in this volume is 'to look beneath the divisions' and the religious and ecclesiastical disputes so characteristic of sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, and rather 'to glimpse the unity of religion as it wells up into the lives of English Christians' (p. 29). But this quest after 'the unity of religion', which is, indeed, the whole thrust of the book, is unwarranted, to say the least, considering the context of the times. For, from the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 until the glorious revolution of 1688, the Church of England was engaged in a fierce controversy directed against both Papists and Puritans, and settled down to an epoch of quiescence only in 1689.

The second, equally serious, problem lies in the way Edwards conceives of the Protestant and in particular the Puritan movement. Since his book is written 'in the conviction that the talk about the gap between' Roman catholicism and Protestantism 'as an unbridgeable 'abyss' has been wrong, he therefore concludes that 'essentially there was one religion' (p. 28). Thus, the reader can search in vain for any explanation or discussion of one of the most fascinating events in English history—namely, the rise of Puritanism and the transformation of Protestantism from a pietistic into a radical and militant movement.

A few examples clearly illustrate the unfruitfulness of Edwards' premises. In attempting to minimise to the utmost the differences between Catholics and Protestants, the author can only regard the fact that so many Englishmen favoured the ecclesiastical changes brought about by Henry VIII as a 'mysterious' phenomenon (p. 24). Yet he can argue this only if he overlooks the fact that when the Tudor sovereigns measured their strength against the Papacy, they found many elements in the nation prepared to lend their support. John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563) was not written merely 'to tell the world the story of the Englishmen who had accepted death when he had himself sought safety on the continent' (p. 72), but was one of the most successful in a long series of books by Protestant writers representing the Reformation in England in the context of providential history. The Puritans, of course, did not seek 'the renewal of the medieval church' (p. 177),

and any attempt to see them as an 'alienated' group under the early Stuarts is just as unacceptable in recent historiography (p. 258).

In short, a new history of Christianity in England from the Reformation to the eighteenth century, incorporating the findings of recent scholarship, is still urgently needed. Regrettably, this has not been provided by the volume under review here.

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