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# (Review) The Reformation and rural society: the parishes of Brandenburg, Ansbach, Kulmbach, 1528-1603

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**Comments**

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The Reformation and Rural Society: The Parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528-1603. by C. Scott Dixon

Review by: Marc R. Forster

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that the standard of true Christianity must be the Bible, which contains nothing against reason. Just as he fiercely attacked the papacy, he left the form of church government in the hands of the sovereign. This all sounds suspiciously like some kind of Anglicanism, as many historians have suggested.

In sum, Skinner's book joins the chorus pronouncing the end of the Enlightenment project, most explicitly by singling Bertrand Russell out as Hobbes's heir at the very end. As the work of a historian, perhaps its greatest value is the demonstration that the project was never entirely based on reasons. Skinner's work contributes to other large debates, building, for example, on the work of Walter Ong on the shift from dialogical to monological reasoning (where Skinner is perhaps not quite fair to Ong's achievement). He also suggests too briefly that the relation between Hobbes and the scientific revolution which allegedly formed him needs reconsideration, but Skinner does not open the question of the role of rhetoric in that revolution. A little more room for such considerations could have been made by tightening the book's organization and cutting repetition. The language sometimes becomes a bit overheated, if never dry. And I feel compelled to offer one correction to the bibliography: Paul Fidler and I mysteriously disappear as the editors of *Political Thought and the Tudor Commonwealth* (1992), from which Skinner cites Fred Conrad's important piece on Sir Thomas Elyot.

**Thomas F. Mayer** ..... **Augustana College**

**The Reformation and Rural Society: The Parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach, 1528–1603.** C. Scott Dixon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 231 pp. n.p.

The extent to which the rural population of Germany accepted and eventually internalized the teachings of the Protestant reformers is a fairly new issue for Reformation historians. The provocative work of Gerald Strauss on the "success and failure" of the Reformation has caused historians to move beyond the urban focus of most early social histories of the Reformation. C. Scott Dixon has made an important contribution to the study of the impact of the Protestant Reformation in the countryside in this study of the parishes of Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach.

This study is fortuitous in a number of ways. In the first place, Dixon has chosen to study a fairly obscure territory, instead of one of the better known (but perhaps less exemplary) Protestant territories like Württemberg or Saxony. Secondly, Dixon focuses on the impact of Protestantism in the parishes, rather than concerning himself, as do most studies of the Reformation in the territories, primarily with the development of the state-church and church-state relations. The study is very well-grounded in archival research and Dixon succeeds in illuminating religious practice "on the ground." His focus on the parishes allows him to show how the reformers' program was implemented and how the population responded to these measures. Not surprisingly, Dixon has located a vast gulf between "expression and deed," that is, between the goals and the impact of the Reformation.

The book is clearly and tightly organized. The opening chapter details the development of the "evangelical movement" in Ansbach and Kulmbach in the 1520s. Luther's ideas initially found supporters in the towns of the region, although the ruling family was more hesitant. The reformers then came to power in 1528 when the new Margrave Georg the Pious issued the *Mandate for the Institution of the Reformation*. Dixon also examines the appeal of the evangelical message in the countryside, arguing convincingly that peasants certainly desired to hear the "Word of God," as they did across southern Germany. This demand, however, was

not the consequence of “conversion” to Luther’s theology nor the mark of a kind of communal reformation in which new religious ideas were employed to underpin demands for greater social and economic justice. Instead, peasants in Ansbach and Kulmbach demanded a more scripturally based religion because the Margrave said “it was their right as subjects.”

In chapter 2, Dixon outlines the creation of the Lutheran Church. This development followed well-known lines. Secular authorities immediately took a strong role in governing the church and most important decisions were made at the Margrave’s court. Dixon, however, emphasizes the slow pace of institutionalization. The 1528 church ordinance, for example, set up the office of superintendent to oversee the local parishes, but the position was only regularized after 1555. A consistory was only created in the 1550s and regular visitations occurred only after 1565. Meanwhile, the Margrave maintained a tight control of both ecclesiastical jurisdiction and clerical appointments, treating the Lutheran Church as part of the state bureaucracy.

Chapters 3 through 5 are the heart of this book. Dixon examines religious life in the parishes, beginning with an analysis of the role of the new pastors. As elsewhere in Germany, Lutheran officials improved parish incomes and staffed the parishes with educated clerics. Dixon then moves beyond a study of the clergy to examine the crucial role of the Lutheran pastorate in the parishes. The pastors were at the forefront of a major program of social and religious reform, legislated from above, in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. Police ordinances tried to rein in celebrations of baptisms and marriages and regulated dances, spinning bees, and other youthful forms of sociability. A variety of new laws forbade swearing and blasphemy and generally sought to create a more moral society. New marriage regulations gave parents more power over their children and sought to prevent premarital sexual activity of all kinds, and new ordinances allowed pastors to ban parishioners who frequently missed services from communion.

Dixon concludes, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the population resisted, ridiculed, and generally ignored all attempts to discipline traditional social life. People continued to miss church services on a regular basis. Dances, church festivals, and various traditional courtship rites continued. When peasants obeyed new laws, it was “only when an appeal to the law worked to their advantage.” The impact of the Reformation on parish life, at least in the sixteenth century, was very limited.

In order to understand why reforms had such a minimal impact at the local level, Dixon examines what he calls “parish politics.” An important conclusion is that pastors rarely received the support of local officials, and often faced their direct opposition. An extensive reform of everyday life such as the one envisaged by reformers, needed the support of the whole local elite. Yet in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach officials outside the central government (and even some there) considered the Lutheran pastorate a threat to their power and authority in the villages. In the villages of this region one finds little evidence of confessionalization, in the sense of close cooperation of the secular and ecclesiastical elite for the purpose of imposing social discipline on the population.

In chapter 6, Dixon turns to a discussion of “the acculturation of the parish mind.” Lutheran pastors failed to change village culture just as they failed to discipline parish morality. Schools, catechism lessons, and sermons had little impact before 1600. Even Protestant attempts to change “Catholic practices” and desecralize confession, divest the Eucharist of its magical powers, and reduce the social aspect of baptism failed. Ultimately, the most important consequence of Protestantism in the countryside was that it forced people to hide their deep-seated religious beliefs. Dixon argues that popular religion remained what it had been before the Reformation, that is, primarily a religion of “prevention and protection.” If the

reformers changed anything, it was to drive traditional religion underground.

It appears obvious that, on its own terms, the Reformation “failed” in Brandenburg-Ansbach-Kulmbach. Dixon argues, however, that by the late sixteenth century popular religion was beginning to change. The population had begun, for example, to develop a clearer sense of what the new church allowed and did not allow. Furthermore, the long-term Protestantization of the countryside involved compromise and acculturation. Because of popular resistance, some of the reform program failed and was abandoned, while other aspects, especially the gradual creation of a firm boundary between “religion” and “magic,” gradually became part of village culture.

This study, like most others of its kind, would have benefited from a different chronological framework. Dixon’s presentation of the evangelical movement of the 1520s and of the creation of a Lutheran church in Ansbach and Kulmbach is clear and useful, but does not move far beyond the many studies of the Reformation in German territories. On the other hand, his study of parish life in the late sixteenth century is much more original. It would be very useful to learn more about how the important changes in popular religion played out. Dixon emphasizes that by 1600 the Reformation had begun to change parish culture, that villagers were starting to understand the church’s distinction between religion and magic, and the educational reforms were “nascent.” A study of the seventeenth century would surely reveal much more about Protestantism in the villages.

Dixon has made a substantive contribution to the discussion of the “success and failure” of the Reformation, begun over twenty years ago by Gerald Strauss. Dixon makes a number of important arguments about rural Protestantism, while repeatedly bringing alive real people in concrete settings. This book tells us much about the impact of the Reformation on the vast majority of the German people, those who lived in the countryside.

**Marc R. Forster** ..... **Connecticut College**

**Seizures of the Will in Early Modern English Drama.** Frank Whigham.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xii + 299 pages. \$54.95 HB, \$19.95 PB.

As the eleventh volume of the series, *Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture*, Whigham’s work accomplishes with an ethical flourish the marriage of historical and theoretical perspectives on early modern literature and theater. Although the book as a whole works to complicate overly simplistic notions of the relationship of will to power in early modern England, Whigham’s primary assertion is straightforward enough. He argues that the “spectacle of social roles performed on stage equipped auditors to edit and improvise social roles off stage,” and that a specific stance dramatized in the theater was less important than the portrayal of improvisation itself. With this in mind, the introduction places the title of the study in clear relation to the plays addressed in subsequent chapters: “The acts of seizure examined below aim ... to do something *to* another, to write oneself man or woman upon the slate of another.” Whigham displays the cultural fabric of which the plays are a part as consisting of intricately knotted strands of courtly power, individual vulnerability, betrayals of family relation, transgressions of the boundaries of social rank, and gender warfare. In situating the drama of the plays in reflective juxtaposition to the drama of the streets, he self-consciously advances his literary venture as an attempt both to glimpse early modern English men and women in willful action, and to delve for the “chastening” rewards our own reactions to such drama may grant us.

Given Whigham’s focus, it is not surprising that chapter 1 focuses on *The Spanish Tragedy*.