

implications proved to be the death knell of his career.' It was this confessional blind spot that 'elevated his work from a mere annoyance to a serious threat, and that turned association with him from undesirable to toxic' (p. 182).

Then, the inevitable question emerges: what is to be gained by reading about such an intolerable, insecure, cantankerous, intellectually toxic person? Here, Macfarlane's methodological brilliance does raise a more serious question about the overall thrust of her argument. Her thesis is that there are more diverse pathways from what we know so self-evidently as secular modernity and its biblical scholarship. The fact that Macfarlane connects that intuition of Broughton with the populist-turn of his *oeuvre* is a brilliant interpretive move: 'Here, the errors and corruptions which Beza, Drusius, Robert Estienne, and others had identified and excised by text-critical means would instead be redeemed from fault by recourse to rabbinic customs, Jewish idioms, phonological mutation, or any of the other brilliant new exegetical tools which critical scholarship had provided.' The ultimate hope, then, would be to open up a new vista of Scripture unsullied by all the errors and emendations. Instead, a new text emerges, one capable of evoking a deep sense of 'awe, wonder, and admiration' for Scripture among 'ordinary readers' (p. 217).

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*Church courts and the people in seventeenth-century England. Ecclesiastical justice in peril at Winchester, Worcester and Wells.* By Andrew Thomson. Pp. xvi + 251 incl. 1 map. London: UCL Press, 2022. £25 (paper). 978 1 80008 314 1  
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Throughout the seventeenth century in England and Wales, clerics and supporters of the ecclesiastical establishment lamented the poor and declining influence of the official Church over society. Puritans, Laudians, restoration Anglicans and latitudinarians complained that there was too little effective supervision of morals, heterodoxy and negligence in religious duty; and many focussed their comments on the failures of the system of church courts which was supposed to discipline people in these areas. Later historians have woven this into a model of 'secularisation'. A steady loss of ecclesiastical authority is a key part of the argument for a long-term decline in the power of faith in Britain. Over recent decades this model has been challenged, with numbers of scholars citing examples of the vigour of religion, even after the supposed losses of the Stuart age. Evidence of clerical initiative, and of a new lay piety that may have taken over from clergy-led institutions, has been unearthed from many periods through to the early twentieth century. There is, therefore, an ongoing debate about how far we were seeing the emergence of a secular culture over the later parts of the early modern period.

Andrew Thomson, in this study of the church courts in three archdeacons in the seventeenth-century dioceses of Wells, Winchester and Worcester, comes down very much on the side of pessimists about the power of ecclesiastical institutions – and perhaps of faith more generally. Following a detailed trawl through the records of these courts, he is able to paint a picture of patchy and weakening influence. The courts handled less business over time; seemed unable to make those they accused appear before them, or to impose their judgements on the

sinner and dissenters they were supposed to punish; and (though the evidence here has to be rather more circumstantial) appear to have fallen into ever deeper public contempt. The author admits the records are not always complete, and that decline was not always steady (there were bursts of activity by particular bishops or court officials, and the immediate post-Restoration period saw some attempts to restore authority through greater vigour): but the evidence – to a degree encapsulated in a run of statistical tables at the end of the book – seems damning. The last chapter's narrative of failures of reform to reverse trends is no more encouraging. The work also suggests reasons for the decline: both in the wider society and culture, and in the workings of the courts themselves. The former category of explanation is pretty conventional. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction was, it is argued, damaged by the anti-clerical legislation of 1640–1; by the wholesale revolt against a political regime that had allied with the Church in 1642; and by a reaction against the sort of tight moral control that marked the Puritan regime of the 1650s. Generally too, the Stuart age is depicted as one of perpetual fear of subversion and rebellion, and the church courts were seen as too ineffective to contain this threat. Action against dissent, and social behaviour that might breed discontent, was increasingly led by parliament passing statutes which were to be implemented by secular forensic structures. The second category or explanation, centred on the workings of the courts themselves, may be fresher, and more useful. Because these lines of argument require close investigation of exactly what was wrong with *ex officio* oaths, with compurgation, and with excommunication and penance as penalties (mostly that they alienated the communities who had to support the system for it to work), the book describes clearly how these processes worked (and did not). It therefore serves as an invaluable guide to the institutions for non-experts, even as it suggests they were ineffective.

Overall, therefore, Thomson tends to support the original seventeenth-century jeremiads. Where this leaves the wider debate about secularisation may, however, be less clear. Some of the evidence for continued vigour in the sphere of faith was of initiatives designed explicitly to compensate for an acknowledged collapse in the Church's formal judicial power (for example, the new stress on pastoralism, structures of lay faith and reformations of manners, following the Toleration Act in 1689). Also, there can be debate about whether the seventeenth century was the crucial breaking point, or whether it represented an attempt at recovery after the losses of the previous century. Gilbert Burnet, the post-1689 bishop, who had a lot to say about ecclesiastical jurisdiction, but makes only a few brief appearances in the work (despite leading one of the dioceses investigated for over twenty-five years), always said that the English Reformation had corrected worship and doctrine, but that it had left discipline (the management of excommunication which church courts were supposed to handle) a corrupted mess. Burnet presented the Reformation as unfinished business. It was as a movement still struggling to bring religious understanding and godly behaviour to a largely unregenerate population. This might be a better way to think about the seventeenth-century Church, and even its courts, than positing a secularising pattern of decline – however well this focussed study justifies its pessimism from its case studies.