

Robert E. Stillman, *Christian Identity, Piety and Politics in Early Modern England*. ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame UP, 2021, pp. x, 477, \$95.00 (hardback), \$75.99 (web PDF and E-pub); ISBN 978-0-268-20041-1 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-268-20040-4 (web PDF), ISBN 978-0-268-20043-5 (E-pub)

In the years 1589-90, Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, spearheaded an unofficial diplomatic visit to King James VI of Scotland, one of Elizabeth I's potential successors. Claiming that Elizabeth was likely to die soon, he offered to support any bid James might make for the succession. Letters associated with the mission represented Essex's journey as if it were an episode from a Renaissance epic—perhaps Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* or Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*—in which a knight turns from the frustrations of love to a quest in the service of Christendom. Central to this crusade was a bid to minimise post-Reformation confessional difference—a piquant contrast to Essex's part in the military campaigns against Catholic Spain at this period, but a notion calculated to appeal to Scotland's theologically informed and ecumenically minded monarch.

Robert E. Stillman's innovatively planned book, explicitly inspired by microhistories such as Eamon Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath* (2001), constellates several writers and texts associated with these events. The story includes agents—the jurist Jean Hotman and the sonneteer Henry Constable—whose irenic approach to religious difference was similar to James's own; Sir John Harington, Elizabeth's godson and part of Essex's circle, who playfully conflated religious identities more often to be found at odds with each other; and powerful aristocratic women whose correspondence helped to further Essex's cause, such as Penelope Rich, the beloved 'Stella' of Philip Sidney's verse. Sidney himself, dead at the time the mission took place, figures from beyond the grave as a powerful knightly inspiration and proponent of inclusive religious piety; a generation later, the poet Aemilia Lanyer commented on this literary legacy of the Sidney family while composing her own religious poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. As this indicates, Stillman uses the story of Essex's mission to open up the wider ideological issues which lay at its heart, and to shine a light on the literary culture which reflected and advanced these enquiries.

The Reformation is most commonly seen as foregrounding debate and disagreement, and thus as heralding confessionalisation: the fixing of religious beliefs into denominational categories. Yet these trends provoked a reaction from those who wished to emphasize what Christians had in common. Hillman poses the question: 'How could a rhetoric of anticonfessionalism or cross-confessionalism survive inside a culture that threatened to turn all religious discourse into an occasion for confessional attack and counterattack or into a pretext for

social and political disempowerment, ostracism, imprisonment, or death?" (100-1) One answer is that though religious difference fuelled wars, wars resolved in peacemaking: and hence, attempts at pragmatic conciliation across denominational lines. Moreover, toleration was seen as a virtue by some very high-profile Reformers—Philip Melanchthon among them—and as politically expedient in many European contexts. Another pertinent factor is the notion of neuters: a term for Christians whose confessional allegiance was hard to determine, or who deliberately evaded such categorisation. As Stillman comments, the epithet was often pejoratively deployed: implying spiritual impotence, and startlingly akin to the abuse sometimes levelled at non-binary individuals in our own time. Yet neuters could exist within the mainstream. Some areas of mainland Europe, such as the Dutch Republic, saw widespread popular opposition to confessional identification, while Erasmus—influential in this and so many other ways—was an early proponent of Christian eirenicism.

As this suggests, Stillman is sensitive to the wider ramifications of his topic. Those looking for a straightforward account of Essex's mission might feel overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of supporting information he gives. But, if so, they should attend to the idea of an 'organising narrative', foregrounded throughout: a story told less for its own sake than to turn the spotlight on a cluster of a-confessional identities. A salutary corrective to the historiographical tendency to exaggerate confessional difference, this stratagem recovers a group of eirenical Christians whose voices have often been drowned out in the babel of post-Reformation discourse. Some are fictionalised; the Catholic humanist Omar Talon, for instance, figures as 'Taleus' in Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*, a dramatisation of the St Bartholomew's Day murders of 1572. When he and Peter Ramus, a Protestant, are threatened by the supporters of the Catholic Duke of Guise, he puts himself at risk in making common cause with his friend: 'I am as Ramus is—a Christian.' This might seem to anticipate the popularity of non-denominational Christianity in the present day—and the paradox, then and now, implicit in the use of the word 'Christian' to define both belief and positioning. However earnestly one retreats from labels, one can never quite exist without them—and they matter, as illustrated by this book's title. Given that Scotland, its monarch and a cast of characters based in continental Europe are central to this study, there would have been a strong case for jettisoning the kneejerk suffix 'in early modern England'.

This broad, energetic, important study deserves to be widely assimilated: not least because, given its concentration on a particular circle, it is more suggestive than exhaustive. For instance, Donne—a marginal presence here—cries out to be considered at length elsewhere. But the implications of Stillman's argument go well beyond

individuals; his book has the potential both to refine future Reformation-era taxonomies, and to show where those taxonomies cannot reach. Would the ‘protesting Catholic puritan’ Harington and his kind have self-identified as PCP+ in our own time?

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Victor Stater, *Hoax: The Popish Plot that Never Was*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022, pp. xxi + 313, £20.00, ISBN: 978-0300123807

Victor Stater’s *Hoax* is meant to be a rollicking read, and indeed provides a richly descriptive narrative of one of the darkest chapters in English history. In 1678 revelations by the despicable perjurer Titus Oates of a ‘Popish Plot’ to assassinate the king, massacre Protestants and reinstate Catholicism in England created a major moral panic and a political and constitutional crisis, resulting in the judicial murders of over a dozen Catholic laymen and priests on trumped-up treason charges, and the imprisonment and deaths of many more.

A new history of the Plot is long overdue: the last comprehensive overview, that of J.P. Kenyon, is now fifty years old. While it is an impeccably researched, lucid and concise account (Stater himself invokes it as his ‘model’ [303]), Kenyon’s reliance on the language of mental illness to explain the Plot— ‘psychotic’ witnesses and prosecutors, ‘unhinged’ puritans and ‘excitable’ priests, ‘neurotic suspicions’, ‘public hysteria’ and ‘paranoiac fear of Catholicism’—now seems dated. Nor have Kenyon’s prurient references to Titus Oates’s homoerotic seminarian fantasies and a supposed Jesuit ‘homintern’ aged well.

Kenyon’s characterisation of the Plot as an essentially hysterical and superficial phenomenon has been rightly criticised by scholars such as Jonathan Scott and Peter Hinds for trivialising the crisis and minimising the centrality of antipopery to mainstream seventeenth-century politics. Yet Kenyon’s assessment of the Plot as a genuine, if largely metropolitan, panic flamed by political passions, rumour and misinformation and abetted by the government’s own miscalculations—he uses the analogy of a stampede in an overcrowded stadium—was itself a salutary corrective to older partisan conspiracist readings of the Exclusion Crisis. Tory historians viewed Oates and other informers as tools of the republican faction, engaged in a cynical and scurrilous attack on Charles II and his Catholic brother and heir, James duke of York. Whig scholars tended to gloss over the Popish Plot prosecutions as regrettable excesses in Parliament’s otherwise