

*Sex and the Church in the long eighteenth century. Religion, enlightenment and the sexual revolution.* By William Gibson and Joanne Begiato. Pp. xii + 384 incl. 15 figs.

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William Gibson and Joanne Begiato deftly outline the need for a work focusing on the relationship between the established Church and sexuality, emphasising that previous scholars of the sexual revolution have devoted their attentions to the impact of the Enlightenment, politics and social mores, while scholars of religion have tended to avoid discussions of sexuality. As the authors argue, ‘to place religion and sex in the eighteenth century in separate categories of thought and behaviour is a mistake; they were for most people inseparable’ (p. 5). The authors offer a plethora of evidence to substantiate this claim, and in so doing reveal the considerable variety in attitudes towards and experiences of sexuality in this era. They skilfully show that throughout the long eighteenth century the Church stood as a moral authority, offering advice and attempting to regulate sexuality. In demonstrating the continued place of the ecclesiastical courts and the Church’s prominent role in the cultural regulation of sexual activity, the authors offer a counter-narrative to Faramerz Dabhoiwala’s suggestion that this was an era of increasing sexual liberty, a liberty rooted in religious toleration.

The early chapters of the book chart the Church’s teachings on sexual matters including fornication, adultery, masturbation and the necessity of sex in marriage, their engagement with public morality and fears about public sinfulness. The continued pivotal role of religion in the making and breaking of marriages is shown through some particularly fascinating cases, including that of Anne More who claimed that her husband Zachariah had poisoned her, allegations he denied by questioning her mental capacities. This marriage dispute was set against a backdrop of religious tension. Although they were both Catholic when they married, Anne soon returned to the Protestant faith in which she had been raised. Both Anne and her niece criticised Zachariah as a ‘Bigotted Roman Catholick’ (p. 133). Whether or not Anne was poisoned, the case highlights that religious sentiment remained crucial in eighteenth-century marriages. Some of the sections in these chapters are very brief and can feel underdeveloped. The discussion of sexual violence opens by highlighting that sexual matters were not considered a form of cruelty, but suggests that courts did hear detailed testimony of abuse and violence. It would have been interesting to see the idea of violence and sex scrutinised beyond the notion of adultery as violence that is then offered, as the theme of adultery is covered in several other parts of the book.

A lot of attention is paid to the experiences of Evangelicals and Methodists. The authors outline how Evangelicalism, although initially associated with excessive and illicit sexuality, increasingly came to be viewed as a bastion of morality and sexual regulation. A vivid picture is painted of John Wesley’s complex relationship with sexuality, and his shifting views on the benefits of celibacy are outlined. Writing in 1743 Wesley claimed that those who found redemption received the gift of celibacy from God. After his own marriage had broken down he then claimed that all men were capable of receiving this gift but that it was often withdrawn, requiring people to turn to marriage to regulate their desires. Wesley’s troubled relationships with young women are examined, including his relationships with Sophie Hopkey and Margaret Bovey during a missionary venture in

Savannah, Georgia. The authors also describe the suspicions raised in the 1770s about John Wesley's relationship with Thomas Olivers, an apprenticed cobbler, itinerant preacher and Wesley's travelling companion. Discussed across several chapters Wesley's tale reveals how carefully people negotiated their own feelings and desires within the regulatory frameworks being promulgated by different religious groups.

The different ideas about sexuality held by Nonconformists, Methodists and Anglicans is particularly revealed in the book's chapter on celibacy. In addition to Wesley's changing endorsement of celibacy, numerous other commentators discussed the relative merits of a celibate lifestyle, although, as the authors note, they did not always distinguish between those who made a religious choice and those for whom a single life enforced celibacy. For some celibacy connoted sexual abstinence and the rejection of marriage, while for others it meant abstaining from illicit sexual activity. The desire to recover primitive Christianity and the memory of the virgin queen meant that discussions about celibacy could praise its merits, while simultaneously condemning the Catholic imposition of celibacy that paved the way for immorality and hypocrisy. Enlightenment thinking changed the criticisms levelled at the celibate, but this was not a move from religious to secular criticism, as Enlightenment thinkers continued to employ religious language to declare that they selfishly withdrew from society.

The authors' discussions of the complexities surrounding sodomy and obscene literature reveal continuities with the seventeenth century. They argue that the notion that homosexual desire was a form of lust caused by a lack of self-control continued to dominate eighteenth-century perceptions, and that it is unlikely that a new effeminate sexual identity was created in the early eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century commentators continued to view homosexuality as a range of behaviours and to believe that such desires were the consequence of a process of moral degeneration. Obscene literature was produced by those connected to clergymen, while churchmen of different denominations were depicted in a range of erotic works. Like seventeenth-century works, late eighteenth-century erotica was used for political satire and expressed anti-clerical sentiments. Attempts to suppress obscene works throughout the era were spearheaded by the religiously minded, and many seventeenth-century works were not prosecuted until the eighteenth century. These continuities further challenge Dabhoiwala's claims of an increasing liberty in sexual matters in this era.

The authors meticulously remind the reader of the book's place in the historiography and where it draws upon the conclusions of others. At times this does not allow the authors to emphasise the book's importance and originality. However, the authors have amassed a great deal of evidence that provides fascinating insights into how people throughout the long eighteenth century understood sexuality, and experienced different sexual behaviours. The book eloquently argues that a monolithic narrative that foregrounds the Enlightenment as the agent for increasingly liberal and secular understandings of sexuality is misleading. Rather, the sexual experiences of men and women across the eighteenth-century provoked contradictions, required critique and were, above all else, exceedingly varied.

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