

REVIEW ARTICLES

REASSESSING THE RADICALS*

The precisianist strain: disciplinary religion and antinomian backlash in puritanism to 1638. By Theodore Dwight Bozeman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. Pp. xv + 349. ISBN 0-8078-2850-5. \$49.95.

Making heretics: militant Protestantism and free grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641. By Michael P. Winship. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Pp. xv + 322. ISBN 0-691-08943-4. \$33.95.

Blown by the spirit: puritanism and the emergence of an antinomian underground in pre-civil-war England. By David R. Como. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. Pp. ix + 513. ISBN 0-8047-4443-2. \$70.00.

The English radical imagination: culture, religion, and revolution, 1630–1660. By Nicholas McDowell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Pp. 219. ISBN 0-19-926051-6. £49.00.

There has only been one historical monograph on the English antinomians and that was published in 1951.¹ They are long overdue for reassessment. Fortunately, that task is well underway. Taken together, three recent books – cumulatively amounting to well over one thousand pages of text – advance our understanding in substantial and significant ways. Of course, the antinomians have not been absent from the historiography over the last five decades. Their involvement in the ‘antinomian controversy’ that wracked the early New England colony during the mid-1630s has been well-worked ground, whilst they are much too colourful a feature of the mid-seventeenth-century English ferment and upheaval to be overlooked. But they have, more often than not, been background figures, tangential characters in a bigger story. By contrast, in these works, they are in the foreground, with an elaborate and illuminating background within which to understand them in fresh and important ways. The result is a welcome reappraisal that is helpful, insightful, and comprehensive.

One of the most important ways in which these books broaden our perspective is by helping us better to understand who they were and what they represented. The epithet of ‘antinomian’ was, like so many, a blunt polemical weapon, first wielded by Martin Luther against John Agricola and his followers who ‘do away with the preaching of God’s wrath’ and ‘remove the law from the church, as if everybody in the church were actually a saint.’² This was hardly fair to Agricola, who could claim to be repeating Luther’s own words. In soteriological terms, then, an antinomian was one who took literally the classic Protestant

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¹ Gertrude Huehns, *Antinomianism in English history with special reference to the period 1640–1660* (London, 1951).

² The quotes are from Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis*, translated by George V. Schick, Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther’s works* (55 vols., Philadelphia and St Louis, 1955–86), iv, pp. 243, 269.

Reformation nostrum of *sola fide, sola gratia*; who refused to let it die ‘a death of a thousand qualifications’;³ and who, a century later, appealed to Luther himself to vouchsafe its orthodoxy. At such a time – when the New England community was still forming its identity in the 1630s, and when England was in turmoil during the 1640s – such convictions were disturbing and, after no little controversy, discredited. That has left the antinomians perched largely on the fringe, effectively isolated by those who won the debates. One effect of these books is to identify the power-plays involved in those manoeuvres and, thereby, not only bringing the antinomians much more into the centre, but also encouraging historians to see them in more rounded and multifaceted ways. These authors move from the bipolar view that previous historians have held of the antinomians, which has them starkly separate from their puritan contemporaries. In different ways Bozeman, Winship, and Como skilfully draw the close connections between the antinomians and the puritan community from which they emerged and in which they remained. This enhanced perspective has much to say not just about the antinomians themselves, but also about that broader community in which their ideas were shaped. The fourth book under review, *The English radical imagination*, offers a similar development that serves to reinforce this shift away from too-simplistic, dichotomized understandings of the past.

I

Theodore Dwight Bozeman’s book is a mature work of scholarship that fulfils the potential of a previous seminal article⁴ and complements his earlier work, *To live ancient lives: the primitivist dimension in puritanism* (1988). Whilst that book explored the primitivist dimension of puritanism – the drive to get back to the roots, to reclaim a pure past – this latest project surveys, as its title suggests, the ‘precisianist strain’ within puritan piety. Bozeman devotes more than half his book to describing the intense labour entailed in a pietist scheme of personal discipline developed by puritan divines in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was, if nothing else, a *strain* for those who sought to practise it. Formed in the main amidst Richard Greenham’s ministry of spiritual direction, popularized and completed by William Perkins, and further developed in a host of other puritan writers and ministers, this stringent regime demanded a life of grinding warfare against the self. It began with lengthy preparations for conversion, involving prolonged self-analysis as the heart was cleansed in preparation for Christ’s entry. It continued in a lifelong watch of the heart in pursuit of an elusive and fleeting assurance of salvation, structured around regular routines and methods, informed by manuals of rules, directions, and long lists of potential sins to identify, confess, and root out. The pietist project was endless both in that there was always more to be done and in that it could never be safely discarded in this life. This complex scheme, designed to reduce anxiety, actually increased it. Indeed, the prestige of these puritan ministers and the demand for their services rested on continued doubt in those among whom they worked, whilst various aspects of the regimen militated against the security it was meant to provide. As Bozeman shows in *The precisianist strain*, the self was presented as hopelessly devious and inscrutable, the saboteur within; the figure of the

³ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, ‘The glory of the “third time”: John Eaton as contra-puritan’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 47 (1996), p. 644. Bozeman repeats the phrase in *The precisianist strain*, p. 198.

⁴ Bozeman, *The precisianist strain*. In his article (p. 641) Bozeman describes the ‘sheer bone-weariness with the devotional and disciplinary grind that, again, lay at the heart of the Puritan practice of piety’.

hypocrite was closely drawn, making it virtually impossible to discern true signs from false; and Satan was presented as a relentless, skilful foe. The more one tried to adopt this method, the less assurance one was likely to find, yet those who applied it in the lives of others failed to discern the 'strategic error' they had made (p. 155).⁵

The central irony in all this may be apparent: the puritans are supposed to have been those at the forefront of the Reformation in England, yet the Roman Catholic overtones to this rigorous scheme are telling. On the one hand, Bozeman draws numerous contrasts between the views of Martin Luther and those of the puritans. For example, they laboured preparation for conversion; Luther argued that 'man cannot establish in himself a point of contact for divine grace' (p. 109). Puritans obsessively sought signs and tokens of conversion in the search for assurance; Luther steered away from them. Puritans saw Christ as judge; Luther preferred not to. They held Christ to be a moral exemplar, thus 'faith became exactly what Luther could not condone: a mode of participation, conformity, proportion, and likeness' (p. 216). On the other hand, Bozeman offers comparisons with Roman Catholic theology. Like those advancing the precisianist strain, earlier Catholic pastoral theology had recommended the complete confessional, the practice of listing and confessing every sin committed in the course of one's life. The daily puritan routines of confession and introspection borrowed from Catholic motifs. The process of keeping watch over one's life showed 'obvious reliance upon Catholic teaching' (p. 111). The fixation with enumerated sins was 'a definite reprise of the effects that had flowed from the papal legislation of 1215' (p. 155). The distrust of self reflected the sceptical air of late medieval Catholicism. The value of doubt in provoking action had been recently underscored at the Council of Trent. In these ways and many more, 'in the most militantly anti-Catholic sector of the English church, was an end result of devotional re-Catholicization' (pp. 149–50).

It is no wonder, then, that some recoiled against this 'legacy of grinding demand' that, 'taken in the strictest sense, was impossibly hard' (p. 169). Bozeman presents us with the backlash. The antinomians represented a new strain of puritanism, one developed in conscious contradistinction to the rigorous asceticism of mainstream puritan piety. In place of this severe discipline they emphasized the sheer largesse of God's free grace. Instead of the anxiety provoked by constant attention to sins and flaws, they refused to allow personal behaviour to be the measure of assurance of salvation. They exposed 'the Puritan apostasy' from Luther (p. 192). They released the solifidian gospel from the accoutrements of human responsibility, duty, and obedience to which it had been tied. They rejected the endlessly delayed gratification of puritan piety to experience joy and delight right now, freed from anxiety in this world as well as the one to come. Their response to the burden of such piety was simple: they threw it out, trusting themselves to a God who saw no sin in his children and who bore no wrath towards them, only kindly goodwill. In this, Bozeman argues, they went beyond Luther or any Reformed confession to contend that the believer would inevitably live a life pleasing to God – no licentiousness here – compelled by the Spirit within rather than any law without. The result would be a life of holiness without the ineffectual (merely human) effort and attendant anxiety of the precisianist strain. Bozeman goes on to explore how these convictions caused such tension in New England during the 1630s.

⁵ On page 173 Bozeman is careful to observe that there were 'sunlit moments' for those on the journey, and in some the regime did help to create a sense of assurance, but these rewards 'came at a heavy cost'.

That is the story that *Making heretics* also tells, though in much more detail. Here, Michael Winship has done for the New England ‘free grace controversy’⁶ what the revisionists did for the English civil war. This means two things in particular. First, he has brought us back to the ‘close narrative’ (p. 10). *Making heretics* is the fullest retelling so far of the story, and the first for over forty years. In this way he follows in the footsteps of Conrad Russell:

Revisionism has also been an attempt to restore the study of political narrative history. To let the search for causes or explanations take priority over the establishment of the correct story is to put the cart before the horse. It has throughout been the revisionist creed that we must establish the course of events by treating it as a subject worthy of study in its own right, and then and only then attempt to analyse its causes.⁷

Likewise, Winship has determined to ‘pay attention to the narrative’ and to make use of the widest possible range of sources, some of them critical and virtually untouched by historians (p. 2). The result is a full and largely satisfying narrative, although given the breadth of research undertaken, it is regrettable that *Making heretics* (like *The precisianist strain*) has no bibliography.

Winship’s narrative goes something like this. Key players in the controversy – people like John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson, and Thomas Shepard – were all resident in New England for some time with no visible conflict among them. This happy state of affairs was unsettled by the arrival of John Wheelwright, whose preaching frequently courted harsh scrutiny, and Henry Vane, whose powerful connections in England made him enormously influential in Massachusetts. His unusual theological views, along with Wheelwright’s, drew critical attention to the theology being espoused by some members of the Boston church. At issue in this theology was the puritan understanding of assurance: could it be drawn from one’s own sanctification, or from a direct communication from Christ? In particular, Shepard, a New England minister, detected in that latter view an odious sink of familism, though largely cloaked from public view. Like a dog in search of a bone, he dug and dug until he decided he had found what he sought, working hard along the way to convince others that heresy really was among them. In the process, what had been a relatively broad and accommodating middle ground fell away. Grievances developed and suspicions on both sides hardened into paranoia. Political manoeuvrings by Shepard and John Winthrop realigned the balance of power against Cotton and Vane. The theological ideas on offer became ever more extreme. At this stage, with compromise impossible, one side had to go. Vane returned to England early on, Wheelwright and Hutchinson were banished, while Cotton managed to re-accommodate himself with his fellow ministers. Hutchinson, the ‘*American Jesabel*’ (p. 188), became the visible scapegoat, pilloried in public accounts as the community tried to put the affair behind it and to reassure an attentive audience back in England.

The second way in which Winship’s approach reflects that of earlier revisionists is, again to borrow from Conrad Russell, ‘a rejection of a dialectical framework for history, a disinclination to see change as always happening by a clash of opposites’.⁸ If there is a clash of opposites in Winship’s reconstruction, it was the result of the conflict, not its cause. The middle ground vanished as polarization gained momentum, but that polarization took

⁶ This is Winship’s preferred label, since it does not prejudice any particular side. It is one that we should now take up and use.

⁷ Conrad Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603–1642* (London, 1990), p. x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

time to emerge. Winship moves beyond a dialectical framework, since it ‘gives an inevitability to the conflict and thus encourages a neglect of the narrative itself’ (p. 2). By implication that conflict was, like the English civil war, not inevitable. Winship also scales back overarching explanations: ‘we need to seek more mundane explanations’ (p. 63). He focuses on short-term causation and the crucial role played by various personalities in bringing it about. ‘This book envisions the controversy in the first instance not as fixed and structural, but as political, as personalities, personal agendas, and an ongoing process of judgment calls, staking of positions, and shifting coalitions, a series of short-term events with cumulative results’ (p. 2).

There are strengths and weaknesses in this approach. One of the strengths is that Winship’s meticulous reconstruction uncovers the actions of individuals who have, on the whole, tended to escape scrutiny in previous accounts of the upheaval. The myth perpetuated by the victors in this dispute – that Hutchinson was chiefly to blame – has been surprisingly enduring. Winship locates other figures who played much greater parts in provoking controversy, particularly Vane and Shepard. The former, aged just twenty-two and son of a privy counsellor to Charles I, quickly became governor of the new colony and began to offer some unconventional, antinomian-style theological opinions. His involvement ‘profoundly altered the spiritual dynamic in Massachusetts’: he caused Cotton ‘to make his first serious stumble’, he pushed Hutchinson into the limelight, and he sparked the colony’s disastrous factionalism (p. 51). On the other side was Shepard, who did more than anyone to escalate conflict. Winship argues that Shepard instinctively missed that visible opposition the puritan movement was formed around, and which old England had so beautifully in the form of Archbishop William Laud. Faced with no such opponent, Shepard needed to create one. He chose to pursue Hutchinson where others might have overlooked (and did overlook) her odd ideas. He ‘ratcheted up the level of confrontation’ with his ‘inflammatory virulence’ (p. 108). At Hutchinson’s trial for heresy, when a surprising number of her critics still hoped to win her over, Shepard mercilessly pursued his desired end: her excommunication. Even as the controversy eventually began to die down, Shepard ‘remained in attack mode’: he ‘continued to fight out the issues of the free grace controversy in his pulpit throughout 1639’ and he ‘continued his attacks’ well into 1640 (pp. 221–3). Through the accumulation of detail and plausible speculation, Winship recaptures the dynamic on intra-puritan controversy that provides a realistic template by which other, similar debates can be more accurately understood. If nothing else, Winship’s investigation tells us a great deal about how puritans argued with each other, and the mix of power and personality in those disputes.

One weakness in his method, however, is the criticism that was levelled against earlier revisionist historiography: in its retreat from overarching explanations it reduced the scale of conflict down to such mundane levels of detail that events were drained of their significance.⁹ The search for meaning, it seemed, had been abandoned. There was little significance beyond the clash of personalities and short-term issues. Winship’s book is open to a similar accusation. For all the many scholars who have tried to interpret the significance of the free grace controversy for the fledgling colony, in Winship’s story the whole affair comes across as simply one more squalid church split writ large. In a sense this is

⁹ See, for example, Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, ‘Introduction: after revisionism’, in Richard Cust and Ann Hughes, eds., *Conflict in early Stuart England: studies in religion and politics, 1603–1642* (London, 1989), pp. 12–13, or Alastair MacLachlan, *The rise and fall of revolutionary England* (New York, 1996), p. 250.

helpful and refreshing if it is true, but it may not be enduringly satisfying and it will not deter future scholars in their search for a deeper significance. And Winship's book is almost entirely narrative, apart from a few useful pages of analysis near the end where he assesses the contribution of each individual to the conflict and makes some insightful connections between the free grace controversy in New England – where puritans were solely ascendant – and the 1640s turmoil in England – where they were not. Even so, his work is helpful. The story, fully told, is important, and it serves as a guide to contemporary free grace controversy in England itself, which has recently been unearthed by David Como.

The most immediately obvious feature of Como's book is its size, extending to over five hundred pages with all scholarly apparatus. It is, perhaps, too long. It struggles to resist the temptation to include absolutely everything, along with too many direct quotations at too great a length, and some repetition.¹⁰ But the accumulated treasure that Como has brought to the surface through his assiduous endeavours renders these features entirely forgivable. Como has, it seems, tracked down every available piece of evidence with which to reconstruct the intra-puritan debates over assurance and soteriology that disturbed the godly community in the decades before the English civil war, the decades when antinomianism took shape as an identifiable feature within puritanism. One of Como's most significant insights is the pressure brought to bear by church authorities during the tenure of William Laud as bishop of London and archbishop of Canterbury. With Laud breathing down their necks and seeing in puritanism only licentiousness waiting to happen, the puritans were more concerned than ever to assert their orthodoxy. It hardly helped, then, to have various puritan figures proclaiming their antinomianism. Leading puritans actively brought antinomians to the attention of church authorities in an attempt to establish their own credibility in the eyes of those authorities. It did not work. Admittedly there is no evidence explicitly confirming the existence of this strategy, nor the pressure puritans might have been feeling from Laud's increasing stature and presence, but Como's thesis is more than plausible. It helps to explain how unnerving similarities could be blown up as outright differences and, once again, exposes the power-plays of some of those involved: 'Antinomians were mounting a serious challenge to the hegemony of mainstream puritan ministers' (p. 393). It also resonates with Winship's reconstruction of New England controversy. In London, too, we see increasing polarization. 'Only through a process of continual engagement (made inevitable through the assiduous activities of extremists on either side) were hard-and-fast boundaries drawn' (p. 74). Thomas Shepard-like figures such as Stephen Denison, the London minister and 'scourge of London antinomians' played a part (p. 95). Denison was the first to cite an antinomian to the court of High Commission¹¹ and he repeatedly appears in Como's account.¹² London was different from New England, however, in that the puritans were very far from those in power. That changed the dynamics and the outcome of controversy considerably.

¹⁰ For example, John Traske is dealt with at some length in at least three different places (pp. 53–9, 138–75, and 348–61).

¹¹ The antinomian was 'the sometime boxmaker and pipe fitter John Etherington', around 1624 or early 1625 (p. 82).

¹² See, for instance, in just one chapter (pp. 82, 87, 95, 96). For more detail on the hostilities between Denison and Etherington, see Peter Lake, *The boxmaker's revenge: 'orthodoxy', 'heterodoxy' and the politics of the parish in early Stuart London* (Stanford, 2001).

A second important insight is Como's subtle reconstruction of antinomian thought that recognizes its connections with familism. Como sees two 'poles' that structure the antinomian 'spectrum' (pp. 38–41). At the much more dominant end were the imputative antinomians, who emphasized the vicarious death of Christ actually in the place of believers with such effect that their salvation was secured at the cross without any effort on their part. At the other end (with much less weight and fewer numbers, but more potential to alarm contemporaries and more raw material for polemical exploitation) were the perfectionist antinomians,¹³ who emphasized the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer, freedom from the law, and perfection in this life. In between there were individuals who held opinions that reflected both of these poles in some measure. The risk here is of confusing two different traditions – one (antinomianism) going back to Martin Luther, the other (familism) going back to the founder of the Family of Love, HN, or Hendrik Niclaes – and thereby to perpetuate the polemical technique of labelling all opponents as familists and to continue marginalizing the antinomians themselves. Yet despite these risks Como's broad inclusion of some familist ideas within antinomianism is persuasive. And his identification of eight elements that may generally be said to characterize antinomianism is subtle and helpful, along with his geographical model that has antinomian figures from several discrete regions, including London, coalescing briefly in London during the 1620s before controversy drove them back out. As Como goes on to explore a considerable number of individuals within that intellectual and geographical construction, a much more detailed picture emerges of antinomian convictions and the historical contexts that caused them to generate such controversy.

II

It is clear that this comprehensive coverage of antinomianism in England and New England before 1640 takes us much further along the road towards a fuller understanding of who the antinomians were and what they represented. However, the language used by each of these authors impedes that fuller understanding. In particular, they continue to label the antinomians as 'radicals'. The consistency with which the antinomians and never their opponents are described as radicals is remarkable. While it may be an easy shorthand to talk of 'radicals' and their 'godly opponents', it is problematic for several reasons.¹⁴

As Conal Condren has pointed out, the word 'radical' is open to two competing definitions.¹⁵ The sense in which it is generally used today is to describe someone who seeks extreme change or innovation. But that sense of the word is an eighteenth-century development at the earliest; it was certainly absent in England in the period before 1640, when the word reflected its Latin root, *radix*, which means to go back to the roots. As Condren observed, this is a conserving metaphor. Thus there were no conservatives and radicals, in the modern sense, only rival claimants to the discourse of conservatism. Those who have come to us as the radicals – and that is how the antinomians have been presented over the

¹³ For more on this grouping, see Nigel Smith, *Perfection proclaimed: language and literature in English radical religion, 1640–1660* (Oxford, 1989).

¹⁴ I have argued in the past that it is misleading to see the antinomians as radicals, in the modern sense of the word. See Tim Cooper, *Fear and polemic in seventeenth-century England: Richard Baxter and antinomianism* (Aldershot, 2001), ch. 1, and 'The antinomians redeemed: removing some of the "radical" from mid-seventeenth-century England', *Journal of Religious History*, 24 (2000), pp. 247–62.

¹⁵ Conal Condren, *The language of politics in seventeenth-century England* (Houndmills, 1994), ch. 5.

last few decades¹⁶ – may simply be those who were least effective in employing seventeenth-century polemical strategies that aggressively sought to claim the mantle of conservatism and paint opponents as innovators. In other words, power dynamics are at work through the use of language resulting in winners and losers – in this case, to put it simply, conservatives and radicals. Therefore, to persist in the use of the word ‘radical’ is to invite misrepresentation of the relationship dynamics and to buy into power struggles of the past. This is regrettable, since what these books do so well is to recapture the proximity of those relationships, the complexity of those struggles. The use of the word ‘radical’ remains a blind spot in the historiography.

Moreover, each book reflects an ambivalence about the relationship between the antinomians and their puritan contemporaries which is largely created by their use of the word ‘radical’ to describe only the antinomians and by other structures of language that, like the word ‘radical’, have the effect of distancing and marginalizing the antinomians. Como has given us a new metaphor to describe the antinomian community – the ‘soteriological underground’¹⁷ – but it is one that we should use with care. The image is a spatial one that serves to marginalize. *Blown by the spirit* opens with language that is too colourful to be accurate, and which does not reflect the tenor of the book as a whole. Como endorses a picture of the antinomians as reflecting a ‘seething underworld hidden just beneath the surface of London society’; he talks of an ‘emergent underground community’ and an ‘antinomian underground’ (pp. 4, 23). Yet the metaphor has limited use, since Como describes two undergrounds – that of the puritans and that of the antinomians, ‘an underground within an underground’ (p. 30) – and the relationship was much more intimate than the metaphor suggests:

[We] should be careful not to dismiss [the antinomians] as an irrelevant band of true believers, isolated from mainstream puritanism. Indeed, it will be argued throughout this study that the disputes between antinomians and their orthodox puritan antagonists were so bitter precisely because no such segregating boundary existed ... Antinomians were considered so dangerous because in many important ways they remained members of the godly community, sharing large portions of the cultural and intellectual heritage that defined puritans as a group within the world ... [E]ven the most enthusiastic first-generation antinomians remained inextricably embedded in what might be called the cultural landscape of early Stuart puritanism ... In almost every way, the [antinomian] Eatonists adopted ideas that were at or near the heart of puritan practical divinity ... [The antinomians] emerged from the bosom of pre-civil war puritanism. (pp. 8, 29, 207, 13)

Indeed they did. Como argues that puritanism was no monolithic structure, no stable and united position; it was ‘factious, diverse, and, to some extent, divided against itself’ (p. 32, see also pp. 434–5). Likewise, Winship contends there was ‘no such thing’ as

a clearly defined, reliable orthodox path of assurance ... Puritan practical divinity as it had developed up to the 1630s was not a unified whole but an assemblage of not entirely consistent techniques, doctrinal emphases, and affects, intended to meet a set of not entirely consistent goals, and its cross-purposes ensured that it continually evolved and generated its own critiques. (*Making heretics*, p. 25)

Antinomianism can be seen simply as one of those internal critiques. Thus there was much more scope for differences and, paradoxically, many more lines of connection

¹⁶ See, for instance, Christopher Hill, ‘Antinomianism in 17th-century England’, in *The collected essays of Christopher Hill*, II: *Religion and politics in 17th century England* (Brighton, 1986), not to mention these books reviewed here.

¹⁷ In this case, the exact phrase is from *Making heretics* (p. 26) but Winship has borrowed it from Como.

between apparently opposing parties. Later in his book Como draws out the similarities and connections in detail. Like their fellow puritans, the antinomians were thoroughly bibliocentric, disliked ceremonial or liturgical piety, drew on the Reformed tradition, sought to recover primitive purity, and urged a holy life. They also shared the same cultural rhythms, joining their fellow puritans in ‘compulsive sermon-gadding, collective Bible-reading, sermon repetition, group prayer sessions, exchange of hortatory letters and manuscripts, as well as habitual private “conferences”’ (p. 439). Thus the image of an underground does not sit easily with Como’s repeated insistence that the antinomians should be seen as an essential part of the godly community, close to the heart of acceptable puritan practice. The same ambiguity is there in Como’s use of the word ‘radical’ to describe antinomianism. On page 24 he describes it as ‘a radical permutation of puritanism’. Yet on page 29 he agrees with Bozeman, who suggests that antinomianism ‘is not well conceived as a type of radical Puritanism’. The word requires much more scrutiny than it has been given, since it undermines the very argument that Como wishes to make.

A similar and equally unhelpful ambiguity resides in *Making heretics*, even though Winship is the only author to define the word ‘radical’ and to recognize innovative potential:

[I]f puritanism was a set of negotiations, if its stability depended as much on the avoidance or massaging down of conflict as it did on agreement, and if radicalism consisted of the disruption of this stability from any other direction, then the adjective ‘radical’ can be bestowed more widely than it usually is. There were individuals who, in their zeal to police and pull in the bounds of orthodoxy, could just as radically disrupt the stability of Puritanism as the occasional heterodox experimentalist. (p. 7)

Here, ‘radical’ is essentially defined as being disruptive, which allows Winship to speak in terms of orthodox radicals, or radical orthodoxy. The primary figure he has in mind here is Shepard, that ‘angry militant on the lookout for deviancy’ who ‘propagated and perpetuated a crisis’ (p. 8).

Yet this promising interpretive possibility is never exploited in the narrative itself. Once again, only the antinomians are the radicals. This is a shame, since Winship’s narrative makes Shepard’s role as a radical (by his definition) more than apparent. Shepard’s own views, on one point at least, were so distinctive as to be in a minority; ‘Shepard was thus not simply the mouthpiece of Massachusetts orthodoxy’ (pp. 104, 68). Despite his initial recognition that the label of ‘radical’ might be applied more widely, Winship consistently applies it only to the usual suspects. Hutchinson and her crew emerge as the radicals once again, even though he implicitly denies the established view that Hutchinson and her supporters were the aggressive element in this story, even though he sees that she was sharing her views for quite some time without any disturbance to the colony, and even though he recognizes that if the balance of power had been different Shepard himself might have been placed on trial (pp. 106, 62, 110). By labelling Hutchinson et al. as the radicals, the opposite understanding is implicitly maintained. Winship’s revisionism has not gone far enough.

The precisianist strain also has two sets of radicals. At the beginning of his book there is a small scattering of instances in which Bozeman describes those staunch puritans of the precisianist strain as ‘radical Protestants’ and ‘ecclesiastical radicals’ (pp. 18, 44). They were a ‘radical minority well to the left within the Puritan spectrum in their time’

(p. 11), though it is not at all clear just what that means.¹⁸ But, once again, this promising interpretive possibility is truncated. Bozeman uses the word ‘radical’ around sixty-five times in the course of his book, but in only six cases does he attribute that word to the precisianists (and one of those is a quote from someone else).¹⁹ For the most part, they are ‘disciplinary extremists’ or militants (pp. 29, 137). And yet, these mainstream puritans were the ones who had moved so very far away from Martin Luther, so far that they unwittingly achieved the re-catholization of Christian piety. Bozeman went to such lengths, literally, to show how the antinomians reflected a response to a culture of puritan piety that was harsh and severe and demoralizing. They threw up a cry for relief. Faced with this oppressive re-catholization they urged a return to classic protestant convictions, as they understood them. Therefore, to describe the antinomians so dominantly as the radicals provides cover for the precisianists and obscures the very close relationship between them all. Bozeman’s final reflections point out the irony that the antinomians took the puritans’ distrust of the self to its logical conclusion, by abandoning it altogether in a system of piety that rested from all works, by seeing all human effort as sourced in the self, and by trying ‘to disengage the busy self’ (p. 325). Connections like these are telling indeed. Bozeman is in danger of doing what Winthrop et al. did when they tried to make sense of the controversy they had just endured: ‘Their sharply dualistic understanding of truth and error encouraged exaggeration of heterodox belief; it led them as well to minimize variations and ambiguities ... through their tendency to think within a simple biformity’ (p. 315). Of all these authors, Bozeman does most to imply two largely monolithic opposing forces – one radical, the other now conservative – in a way that minimizes commonalities.

Another book to challenge past dichotomized understandings and see connections that were not clear before is *The English radical imagination*. Here Nicholas McDowell dismantles the claims of heresiographers like Thomas Edwards that the ‘radicals’²⁰ of the English revolution were only uneducated and ‘illiterate Mechanick Persons’ (p. 1). At the same time he disagrees with Christopher Hill, ‘the most influential scholar of radicalism in the English Revolution’ (p. 2), and other historians who perpetuated this view that these were merely tub preachers arising out of popular culture and speaking to the plebeian masses. As McDowell shows, that is not at all the case. While some of these extreme figures were uneducated, a great many were not. McDowell pays particular attention to Richard Overton, John Milton, Abiezer Coppe, and Samuel Fisher, showing how these writers were all highly educated. While they themselves embraced the identity of the holy fool, their own language, often a parody of scholarly learning, betrayed their classical and humanist education. They adopted scholarly forms and language to subvert the perceived attitude of the educated (mainly Presbyterian) clergy that superior education reflected superior spirituality. These writers criticized prevailing power structures that shut out the uneducated (which, of course, also shut out women) from positions of authority in the church. The ability to speak Latin was the

¹⁸ Bozeman discerns a ‘move distinctly to the right’ early on, and the antinomians later reflect the ‘protestant radical left’ (pp. 19, 298).

¹⁹ I have included in that total all derivations of the root word, ‘radical’, but not the phrase ‘radical reformation’.

²⁰ It is striking that at no point in the book does McDowell justify or clarify the use of the word ‘radical’, or why these writers qualify as radicals.

key that gained entry to this closed world.²¹ Even rudimentary grammar books were designed in part to ensure not just linguistic orthodoxy, but religious and political orthodoxy as well.

Yet, for all their critique of scholarly society, many of those who challenged those boundaries and barriers had emerged from that society and were, in their sophisticated writings, speaking to that society. Abiezer Coppe, in some ways ‘the most sensational and notorious heretic of the English Revolution’ (p. 89), is a case in point. McDowell sketches Coppe’s education in orthodox puritan circles, and he clarifies Coppe’s baffling writing style. Very often, Coppe was consciously parodying ‘the foundation text of the intellectual culture of early modern England’, Lily’s Grammar (p. 100). At other times he engaged Hebrew, which was viewed as God’s language in its singularity of structure and strangeness of form, as opposed to Latin, which was seen to resonate with external human regulations. Thus, at this level, Coppe was seeking to subvert an established hegemony based on learning and Latin. But he did so from the inside, not the outside. A parody of Lily’s Grammar would make sense only to those whose education had been shaped by it. Past historiographical ‘assumptions that radical belief originated in a popular heretical underground have distorted critical perceptions of Coppe’s prose’ (pp. 91–2). The ‘Puritan backgrounds of the writers who provide the focus of this study indicate that their radical beliefs are better explained as a reaction to or a development of the ambiguities and contradictions of Calvinist theology than as an expression of heretical ideas which circulated in a timeless “radical underground”’ (p. 11). This is another reminder that ‘a bipolar model of cultural division and conflict, which tends to structure cultural history in terms of preconceived binary divisions ... [is] insufficiently flexible to do justice to the complexities of early modern society’ (pp. 6, 7).

While McDowell takes us from 1630 to 1660, none of the other three books traverses any territory beyond 1640, though Como makes a brief foray and each author is aware that what they have written has implications for that eventful decade when antinomian thinking came very much out into the open. What we now need, then, is a study that will take the progress that has been made in these books and extend it into the civil war and interregnum. One hopes Como has such a project in mind: he is well placed to complete it with distinction. And yet these books throw up an intriguing possibility. What we may have in the ‘rise of antinomianism’ is not so much the emergence of something new, but the falling away of something that had become well established but found wanting. Though the power structures and the dynamics of each case is different, what each of these stories relates is the precisionist strain losing its hold on puritanism as more and more people, disenchanted with its effort and anxiety, looked for a mode of spirituality that involved less psychic and spiritual discomfort.

If this is the case, it is one more reason why the continued use of ‘radical’ is an unhelpful and unnecessary intrusion, since it takes our focus off the truly central developments and players. But this is not to condemn these books: each one is a marvellous work of scholarship. It is simply that their arguments are far too important to be obscured by the continued use of language structures that are inappropriate and that distort our conceptions. It is a partial call to reconsider the way in which historians use the word ‘radical’ to describe the seventeenth century. And it is a reinforcement of what these books call on

²¹ The word ‘illiterate’ in the seventeenth century principally referenced the inability to read Latin (p. 30).

us to do: to see the antinomians not as an isolated and marginalized aberration, but to see them as reflecting (in many ways) the heart of puritanism and to view their contemporary puritans with a more critical glance. Who were the antinomians? If the label of 'radical' is too problematic to use with such sweeping ease, what can we use? These books provide a number of alternatives: 'godly dissidents', 'disillusioned veterans of godly religion', 'disenchanted puritan insiders'.²² The last perhaps says it best. The antinomians were inside, not underground; they were in many ways indistinguishable from their fellow puritans; and, as such, they reveal the puritan community itself. Given the enormous extent to which these books have sketched that community more accurately, we should be grateful.

UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND

TIM COOPER

²² Como, *Blown by the spirit*, p. 3; Bozeman, *Precisianist strain*, pp. 198, 326.