

The Reformation of the Decalogue: Religious Identity and the Ten Commandments in England, c. 1485–1625. Jonathan Willis.

Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xx + 388 pp. \$120.

Students of the English Reformation have devoted minimal attention to the history of the Ten Commandments. Thanks to the work of the late John Bossy, we are aware that the Decalogue moved ahead of the seven deadly sins as a moral code in late medieval and early modern Christianity. Reformation historians are also familiar with the iconoclastic changes that Reformed Protestants made to the Commandments' numbering, dividing the first commandment and consolidating the ninth and tenth. But, as Jonathan Willis suggests at the outset of this consistently stimulating book, historians wrongly seem to have assumed that the Ten Commandments were too simple and universal to reward extensive historical analysis. Willis convincingly shows the error of this assumption, arguing that the English Reformation "changed the Decalogue in profound ways" and that the Decalogue "not only reflected but also helped to shape the development of the reformation in England in a series of nuanced but significant ways" (5–6).

Over the course of ten case studies scattered throughout the book's six chapters, Willis shows the fascinating ways in which Protestant divines "exponentially expanded" the content and scope of each commandment, turning them into exhaustive guidelines for moral conduct (150). For instance, George Downame's interpretative scheme turned 10 commandments into at least 120 through distinctions between prescription and proscription, omission and commission, and thoughts, words, and deeds. Protestant divines made the command to honor one's father and mother into the basis for sweeping accounts of the duties and responsibilities inhering in all social and political hierarchies, while the commandment prohibiting theft was given distinctively early modern economic meanings. More broadly, though, Willis argues that English Protestant theologians transformed the meaning of the Decalogue itself, defining its three offices (civil, evangelical, and practical) in ways that both solved and created problems for them. Rather than treating the Decalogue as revealing a way of living that would please God, the point of the Protestant Decalogue was "to demand the impossible, and to condemn individuals when they inevitably failed to deliver" (140).

On this point, Willis argues that the Reformed consolidation of the ninth and tenth commandments—redefined as concupiscence—was more significant in English Protestantism than the division of the first commandment, with its implications for idolatry. For the elect, and them only, the Decalogue was seen as providing a spur to repentance and godly living, and Willis sees this use of the Decalogue as the key to understanding the distinctive identity and spirituality of English Puritans. Yet, as Willis shows in his very interesting sixth chapter, the Ten Commandments assumed an unprecedented centrality for the whole population in the liturgy of the Church of England and on the walls of every parish church (and at least one pub). For the bulk of

the population who encountered the Commandments in this simplified context, rather than through the lens of Puritan theology, the new importance of the Decalogue may have ironically encouraged the sort of “country divinity” that equated salvation with obedience and that Protestant theologians wished to eradicate.

Reviewers often lament the challenge of discussing complex books in a few hundred words, but it is especially true in this case. This is an ambitious book that develops arguments about a wide range of subjects, including (but not limited to) the history of English antinomianism and perfectionism, the nature and dynamics of Puritanism and popular religion, the meanings of church interiors and religious art in post-Reformation England, and the importance of what Willis calls the “cultural history of theology” for understanding the English Reformation (353). At times, more comparison with early modern Catholic readings of the Decalogue and with conformist Protestant readings might be helpful. There is also sometimes an ambiguity about the extent to which the Decalogue might be said to be shaping developments in the English Reformation, or vice versa, but this is perhaps unavoidable and validates Willis’s broader point about the complex and important role played by the Decalogue in the religious transformations of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Historiographically engaged and drawing on a diverse range of sources, this book makes many important contributions to our understanding of the English Reformation.

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John Owen and the Civil War Apocalypse: Preaching, Prophecy and Politics.
Martyn Calvin Cowan.

Religious Cultures in the Early Modern World. London: Routledge, 2018. xvi + 220 pp. \$140.

Cowan’s book reflects on the preaching of the well-known Puritan John Owen (1616–83) before Parliament and in other nationally significant settings. Focusing on thirteen sermons from this context, in the years 1646–59, Cowan seeks to illumine ways in which Owen’s engagement of national affairs related to his eschatological beliefs about the prophesied end times. “The central thesis of this book,” Cowan writes, “is that Owen’s sermons from this period are best described as a form of ‘prophetic preaching’” (3). Cowan enters into a technical debate in invoking the language of “prophetic preaching.” A functional taxonomy in the history of preaching (drawn from the work of John Wilson) regularly terms “prophetic” those sermons that center on human responsibility and agency over against “apocalyptic” sermons that highlight divine action. Cowan seeks to question this binary by suggesting instead that “the significant apocalyptic material in Owen’s sermons is complementary to, and indeed