

Alasdair Raffe. *The Culture of Controversy: Religious Arguments in Scotland, 1660–1714*.

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Alasdair Raffe's important and deeply researched book on the culture of religious controversy in Scotland from the Restoration to the reign of Queen Anne is likely to spark controversy itself. It opens with a frontal assault on the now fashionable concept of the public sphere, which Raffe insists is inappropriate for Scotland, where there were fewer newspapers or coffee houses, where public opinion was disregarded by many and debate not always rational, and where the later-Stuart culture of public controversy was merely an elaboration and intensification of discursive practices that had been prevalent since the sixteenth century. Rather than being a local variant of the Habermasian model, Scotland offers a unique case in the history of public politics, Raffe declares, and, therefore, we need a new framework for thinking about public arguments in Scotland at this time — although his critical insights clearly raise questions about the applicability of the concept of the public sphere to other locales in the early modern period. Raffe's preferred alternative is the culture of controversy, which he defines as “the range of discursive practices and forms of communication used to argue about matters of public concern” (12). He finds that there was extensive participation at all social levels in religious controversy in later-Stuart Scotland (albeit there was no equality of participation, since gender, social status, and education all affected how contemporaries evaluated each other's arguments and practices), that multiple media (printed, scribal, oral, and nonverbal forms of communication) were involved in articulating and disseminating religious controversy, and that the arguments put forth were not always intended to persuade but rather frequently served to polarize opinion.

After starting with a consideration of the various religious groups and cultures in later-Stuart Scotland (there were a few Quakers, Catholics, and atheists, in addition to Presbyterians and Episcopalians, who themselves were of various hues), Raffe deals first with controversial discourse — the debates over the covenants, persecution, fanatics and enthusiasts, and the morality of the clergy — before turning to controversial action — the practice of religious nonconformity and crowd violence. By spanning the Revolution of 1688–90, which saw the intolerant Episcopalian establishment overthrown and replaced by a similarly intolerant Presbyterian one, and moving forward to include both the Union of 1707 and the Toleration Act of 1712, he is able to address important questions of change over time. We find out not only how the competing religious groupings in Scotland saw each other but also how they came to define themselves during what was a period of confessional divergence in Scotland. We learn a great deal about the various styles of piety and public worship and the practices of conscientious dissent, how rival groups used the vocabulary of persecution or the rhetoric of antippery to different ends, how the Scottish Episcopalians came increasingly to embrace the English Book of Common Prayer and move away from Calvinism toward Arminianism, and how ordinary Scots could make interventions in public religious controversy through collective action.

This is an impressive first book that both teaches us much about the religious history of this important period of Scotland's past and challenges us to rethink a number of broader issues about how we conceptualize the culture of public contestation in the early modern era. Skeptics might nevertheless wonder how far Raffe's alternative framework really takes us. At times his study reads like a catalogue of the various arguments made by the different sides. He has not offered a history of ideas in the tradition of the Cambridge school (a study, that is, of where the ideas came from). Yet nor is this really a study of the impact of ideas on history; indeed, his particular thematic approach, with each chapter looking at one particular controversy over the entire period, mitigates against measuring what impact a range of discursive practices about matters of public concern might have had at any given historical moment. By contrast, scholars writing about the public sphere (whether in its English or British local variant) surely have been interested in exploring how particular publics were engaged at particular times and with what results and implications. The crowd activity analyzed in Raffe's final chapter is not always sufficiently contextualized fully to show how the Scots were seeking to make a public intervention in a particular controversy: the pope-burning in Edinburgh on Christmas Day in 1680, for instance, was intended to challenge the view circulated by the progovernment media in England that Scotland was opposed to the exclusion of the Catholic heir. Nor did I quite understand the logic of limiting the discussion to crowd violence, and thus excluding more peaceful forms of collective action, while at the same time excluding the rebellions of 1666 and 1679.

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