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## REVIEWS

**Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshal, eds., *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000) 324 pp.**

This volume of essays by mostly British scholars takes the basic premise that “like the poor, the dead are always with us,” and argues that every society has its own ways of “placing” its dead physically, mentally, and emotionally. In pre-modern Europe, the place of the dead was without a doubt much closer to the living than it is today, as mortality rates and funerary practices were constant reminders of the common fate that inevitably awaits us all. Considering this, death in late medieval and early modern Europe can be a lucrative entry point into an examination of these societies themselves. Using death and the dead as a basic theme, this collection of articles presents a series of case studies covering a wide spectrum of medieval and early modern European societies, ranging geographically from Scotland to Transylvania and chronologically from the mid-fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries.

Modern scholars have often conceptualized the dead in medieval and early modern Europe as its own social category, or what Natalie Zemon Davis and others have called an “age-group” that was still bound to the living through ties of memory and mutual obligation (6). In Roman Catholic societies, the belief in Purgatory left believers with the duty of assisting the souls of their dead ancestors through prayers and masses, while at the same time beliefs in saints required them to negotiate with the dead to obtain their favor and intercession. These obligations could be burdensome as much of a community’s resources were diverted toward the maintenance of commemorative cults, and historians such as A. N. Galpern have commented that pre-Reformation Catholicism at times seemed to serve the dead more than it did the living.

One of the most important aspects of the Protestant Reformation was a redefinition of the place of the dead in society, and the beliefs in saints and Purgatory were among the first Catholic traditions to be attacked in Protestant countries. Reformed ministers preached that a soul went directly to their eternal reward or punishment after death, making the prayers either to or for the dead useless gestures. According to Protestant doctrine, the living had no obligation toward the dead apart from providing an adequate burial, beyond which the departed were removed

from their reach and concern.

Even though Protestant theology sought to eliminate the place of the dead in society that had been so prominent in Catholic culture, many of the essays in *The Place of the Dead* make it clear that it was not always so easy to put these new doctrines into practice. For example, the contributions of Andrew Spicer and J. S. W. Helt demonstrate that in many Protestant countries people sought to maintain a social presence after their death through wills, endowments, and monuments. The essays by Graeme Murdock, Larissa Juliet Taylor, James M. Boyden, and Philip M. Sorgel likewise argue that among both confessions, the dead were used by preachers as moral lessons and political propaganda, suggesting that the place of the dead was not so easily disposed of.

One of the reasons for this continuity between Catholic and Protestant culture is that the categories of living and dead were not as clearly defined in medieval and early-modern European societies as religious doctrine alone might suggest. Although the status of the dead and their relationship to the living were clearly defined by both Catholic and Protestant theologians, their policies did not always correspond with common practice. This is especially apparent when one looks at examples in popular culture. Nancy Caciola's work on spiritist cults in fifteenth-century Berne shows that even though Catholic doctrine stipulated that a person went directly to Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory after death, many people held onto the belief that a spirit remained in the physical world for some time after death, and had the potential to either help or harm the living. Bruce Gordon's research on Protestant Basle shows how reformed preachers in rural Switzerland had to exercise a degree of doctrinal flexibility when ministering to the peasants who made up their congregations, even to the point of incorporating beliefs in ghosts into their sermons in order to appeal to the cosmology of the peasant mind.

This continuity between Protestant and Catholic culture is one of the most interesting conclusions one can draw from this book. Although reformers sought to break the traditional ties between the living and the dead, dismissing them as useless superstitions, many practices endured that suggest a desire to sustain these links. Penny Roberts' article on burial disputes in sixteenth-century Paris, and Andrew Spicer's work on church burials in reformation Scotland, both show that Protestants from elite families wanted to be buried with their Catholic ancestors and maintain their ties of kinship after death. J. S. W. Helt's article on women's wills in Elizabethan England suggests that through wills and

endowments women created networks of memory that maintained “a sense of spiritual and material affinity between the dead and the living community”(189). All of these examples show that using death as a category of analysis can provide a more nuanced picture of past societies than is possible from a study of doctrine and policy alone.

If this book has a weakness, it would be that it often seems to simply place older research into new scenarios only to reach the same general conclusions. Anyone who is already familiar with the work of Philippe Ariès, Natalie Davis, or Patrick Geary will probably not find anything new in the majority of these articles. Yet despite this shortcoming, most of these essays are very interesting and readable. Some of them, such as ones about sermons in Transylvania and “monstrous infants” in Germany, cover locales and topics that do not often appear in the historiography of medieval and early modern Europe. Even if this book does not change how historians regard death and dying in pre-modern Europe, it is still very worthwhile to read. Because of the unique perspective that the topic of death can provide, this book can be an especially useful introduction to pre-modern European culture and society, particularly for undergraduate students.

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