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Ronald G. Asch, *Sacral Kingship between Disenchantment & Re-enchantment: The French and English Monarchies 1587-1688*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. x + 278 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 1-78238-356-7.

Review by Ellen McClure, University of Illinois at Chicago.

In this important, provocative, and quietly masterful contribution to the study of early modern political theology, the eminent German historian Ronald G. Asch takes aim at two assumptions that have come to dominate the field. The first is that the move from the exotic ritual of monarchy to the more mundane world of democracy, or, as Marcel Gauchet puts it in a quote that Asch references throughout the book, from “the prose of bureaucracy” to “the poetry of the prince,” can be captured by a narrative of progressive secularization, or, to cite Gauchet once again, disenchantment.^[1] The second is that after the Hundred Years’ War, the histories of France and England followed increasingly divergent paths, and therefore, the study of one is of limited benefit in understanding the other.

Asch seeks to replace these teleological narratives of independence with a more nuanced tableau that replaces the inexorability of progress with a pushing and pulling between politics and religion, France and England, in which a fragile equilibrium was repeatedly sought, briefly attained, and occasionally restored. To that end, he eschews a chronological sequence of thematic chapters and instead organizes the book around three critical periods in French-English relations, which he proceeds to consider in detail and, as much as possible, on their own terms.

The first period covers the years between the execution of Mary Stuart in 1587 and the publication of James VI (and I)’s *Remonstrance for the Right of Kings* in 1615. Asserting that “at no time since the mid fifteenth century had the histories of the French and the English monarchies been so entangled” (p. 15), Asch carefully traces the multiple points of contact between the two kingdoms as their monarchs sought to navigate increasingly tricky ideological waters. Having charted the means by which Henry IV and James VI (and I) managed to legitimize their authority in the face of substantial challenges, Asch then moves on to the 1630s and 1640s, when the paths of the two kingdoms sharply diverged: England moved towards civil war while France, appalled by Henry IV’s assassination in 1610 and by developments across the Channel, laid the foundations of divine right monarchy. The third and final section of the book examines the decade preceding England’s Glorious Revolution in 1688, when both James II and Louis XIV appeared to embrace a hardened, and politically disastrous, religiosity.

Asch approaches all three periods through what he identifies as one of the central assumptions of his study, that “ritual, ceremony and images of power can only be understood adequately if they are seen in the context of political, and, even more importantly, theological debates” (p. 9). In other words, he takes religion seriously, or at least maintains that the monarchs of the time did so, viewing it not as a means of cynically manipulating a gullible populace, but rather as a vibrant, plausible source of royal legitimacy in which they themselves believed.

Yet, if the power of religious discourse during this period made it an indispensable element of royal self-presentation and legitimation, that very same power rendered it difficult to control, even for the most

skillful monarchs. As Asch repeatedly demonstrates, while the appropriation by rulers of a certain strain of religiosity delivered indubitably short-term benefits, those benefits often proved impossible to sustain. Not only did chosen models of aligning the secular and the sacred call into being alternate, oppositional models, but the choices made by one monarch narrowed, or even determined, the options available to his successor.

One of the singular contributions of Asch's study is its evaluation of the political efficacy and longevity of the various configurations of the political and the theological during this time. James VI (and I)'s adoption of the persona of a Calvinist orator and thinker, necessitated by the particular politico-religious climate in England and by James's own convictions, proved less successful than Henry IV's weaving together of a reputation, grounded in fact, as a warrior hero with an ostentatious adoption of Catholic ritual intended to assuage doubts about his Protestant origins. Yet, Asch demonstrates how both articulations of kingship can be read as responses to a shared crisis: "Both Henry IV and James VI (and I) faced the challenge of resacralizing the monarchy in a world which seemed to leave little room for sacral kingship, except where the monarch was content to define his role exclusively as that of an obedient servant of the ecclesiastical authorities" (p. 57). Their successors, Louis XIII and Charles I, worked to complete this work of resacralization, but as Asch points out, their efforts to establish a lasting connection with their subjects by emphasizing their Christ-like humility and humanity, even, and especially, through their distinctive deaths, constituted a "risky strategy" that opened the monarchy to new critiques, which themselves were religiously grounded (p. 102).

Asch's methodology and framework prove particularly valuable in his reconsideration of the short, troubled reign of James II in the 1680s. Against those who read James II's seemingly deliberate unraveling of his brother's successful restoration of the monarchy as short-sighted bigotry, Asch argues that James II's choices were governed by an effort to reinfuse kingship with a sincerity of belief and practice that had all but disappeared during the reign of Charles II. The James II presented by Asch viewed himself as the humble incarnation of an office greater than himself, and strove to accommodate and integrate the various religious minorities of his kingdom into a larger, divinely grounded, whole. Asch maintains that this strategy could have worked. It was undone not, as Steve Pincus would have it, by the irresistible forces of a secular modernity, but rather by Louis XIV's revocation of his grandfather's Edict of Nantes in 1685.^[2] The French monarch's move to outlaw the practice of Protestantism in the French kingdom, itself motivated by a particular configuration of divine right kingship that grew out of Louis XIII's reign, confirmed the worst fears of an already suspicious English public, much as the execution of Mary Stuart had inflamed Catholic sensibilities in France a century earlier. Moreover, the Revocation created a wave of Huguenot refugees without whom, Asch argues, the Revolution of 1688 might not ever have occurred (p. 148).

Asch's reconsideration of these three crucial periods in early modern French-English relations convincingly demonstrates the significant influence that religion continued to exert on politics throughout the seventeenth century. Yet, it also does much more. Asch successfully presents both monarchy and religion not as stable, essentially conservative monoliths, but rather as fluid and dynamic systems that constantly adjusted to shifting contexts both at home and abroad. Secularization thereby appears not as the welcome, inevitable, and universal emergence from the dark night of superstition, but as the rather clumsy name given to a wide range of recent adjustments in the alignment of the sacred and the profane.

Asch is aware that challenging the narrative of secularization calls for a reassessment of why we should teach and study the early modern, which can no longer be unproblematically read as the source of our own modernity. His final paragraphs invoke the replacement of the symphony of western nations, each with its own historically and contextually determined version of "modernity" and "secularization," with European unification, whose ultimate form of legitimacy and civil religion has yet to take shape. His conclusion, that "without some element of political culture which is more than merely rational and

secular in nature, it is difficult to see how a united Europe could possibly survive” (p. 166), neatly sums up his conviction, eloquently and convincingly expressed in this book, that religion, broadly understood, continues to be a necessary aspect of political legitimation.

Asch’s impeccably sourced, well-argued study is part of a recent and welcome trend in scholarship that emphasizes the centrality, vitality, and diversity of theology in early modern politics.^[3] Its portrayal of the interwoven nature of French and English history during this time makes an elegant case for redrawing and expanding existing scholarly boundaries. By softening the focus on long-held assumptions and predetermined outcomes, it brings to light the tangled complexity of the early modern period and quietly, yet forcefully, invites us to do the same.

NOTES

[1] Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde: Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

[2] Steve Pincus, *1688: The First Modern Revolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011).

[3] For a fresh look at secularization, see Julie E. Cooper’s *Secular Powers: Humility in Modern Political Thought* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Arlette Jouanna’s recent paired books, *Le pouvoir absolu: Naissance de l’imaginaire politique de la royauté* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013) and *Le prince absolu: Apogée et déclin de l’imaginaire monarchique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), offer a similarly nuanced portrait of early modern monarchical imaginary, but are restricted to the French context.

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