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Willis, Jonathan.

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

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xx, 388 +22 ill. ISBN 978-1-108-41660-3 (hardcover) \$137.95.

Foundational elements of a culture make for daunting but valuable subjects of study. In *The Reformation of the Decalogue*, part of the Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History, Jonathan Willis walks readers through a comprehensive examination of how the Ten Commandments were incorporated into England's religious, political, and social life during the long sixteenth century. Far from being a straightforward tracing of precepts and their practice, Willis's work shows that the Decalogue was debated not only between Catholics and reformers, but far more widely. His book shows different factions eager to promote particular readings of the proper relationship between ecclesiastical and secular authority, define the higher priorities of moral reformation, and shape the lived experience of Sabbaths and sermons across the country. Necessarily, Willis draws deeply from theological materials, while also employing literary, pedagogical, judicial, philosophical, political, and architectural sources to illustrate how deeply the commandments were integrated into early modern English life.

From the start, Willis lays out the many challenges that complicate his study, beginning with a notable dichotomy between the Decalogue's recognized place in Christian culture and the relative paucity of historiography about the Ten Commandments' role in the English reformation. Willis attributes this oversight to a sense that the subject has been deemed equally elementary as elemental, so that it hides in plain sight. That sense, he asserts, seriously hampers our understanding of the English Reformation which changed the Decalogue in wording and numbering and, in turn, saw the divine guidance used to shape essential concepts of a moral society. England's Reformation, in short, was framed by these few and highly charged precepts that were open to endless reinterpretation. Willis acknowledges the profound difficulties of teasing out the Decalogue's direct influence on so many topics—from keeping the Sabbath to punishing adulterers—and has filtered his sources to include only what he saw as directly relevant references to the commandments, mostly in printed works such as texts for catechumens, pastoral texts, or polemical

pamphlets, but also encompassing diaries and other autobiographical materials as well as rare surviving commandment boards that reproduced these guides in every English church of the time.

The Reformation of the Decalogue is organized thematically, allowing for a broad treatment of subjects which may frustrate readers seeking quick explanations or references. For instance, the first part, on “The Civil Office of the Law,” studies how expressions of law and order were animated by the Ten Commandments. Much in this first section directly concerns the Decalogue’s implications for the magistracy and secular order. Here, Willis explains the divide that emerged on enumerating and expressing the Ten Commandments, where Catholics and Lutherans hewed to Augustine’s interpretative model and preferred the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue while the Reformed Protestants followed the Jewish tradition also used by many Greek fathers, such as Origen, in their formulation. Given the path of England’s Reformation, Willis applies the latter system throughout his work, and the commandments, by number, serve to organize a number of sub-sections. In the first of these, he shows that Reformed Protestants’ counting the proscription against graven images as the Second Commandment, rather than a subsidiary clause of the First, was not simply a minor dispute but a distinction that highlighted theological divides in English society. Here, Willis shows how reformers invoked their Second Commandment to attack Catholics as idolaters in practice and as impious heretics in general for failing to follow what they saw as God’s emphatic command on the form of worship.

The next sections address the evangelical and practical offices of the law, with chapters discussing sin, salvation, the godly, and the ungodly. Here, more of the tension within English Protestantism emerges, with what Willis terms the depth and breadth of sin implied in the commandments as outlining positive traits while itemizing failings. Even as most English Protestants agreed that the Decalogue grounded their faith, many used their interpretations of particular elements to condemn their rivals for forwarding other readings. This is particularly evident where Willis documents the tensions over and among English Puritans in regards to the Ten Commandments defining godly doctrine and experience such as erupted with controversies over keeping the Sabbath. When Elizabeth I mandated tables of the Decalogue in every church, Willis shows that these resulting commandment boards manifested desires for

ecclesiastical uniformity while also educating parishioners to see the divine law as a bulwark against ungodly behaviours.

The Reformation of the Decalogue is a significant book, drawing on the work of Alec Ryrie, Naomi Tadmor, Alexandra Walsham, and Peter Marshall, among many other scholars, to show how English reformers embedded the Ten Commandments in every element of their culture. Willis acknowledges at the outset that his scope is ambitious and that this same ambition might frustrate some readers. This book does not track change over time, nor is it arranged for the easy extraction of materials relevant to particular commandments, controversialists, or questions (where the brief index is of only limited utility). Nevertheless, *The Reformation of the Decalogue* is a wide-ranging and erudite study that will be of value to scholars of many disciplines working in England's long sixteenth century. Furthermore, this book will reward each new reading with further insights about the role of the Ten Commandments in early modern culture.

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