



BOOK REVIEW

Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, *Jewish Christians in Puritan England*

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The focus of this thought-provoking study is the intriguing phenomenon of individuals emerging from within the seventeenth-century English Puritan community who urged the adoption of Jewish religious customs that the vast majority of their Protestant contemporaries considered part of the Jewish ceremonial law that had been superseded in the gospel era. These customs included the observance of Jewish dietary restrictions, of the seventh-day Sabbath, of Passover and, in a few cases, of physical circumcision. Focusing on three illustrative examples of this ‘Judaising’ tendency within Puritanism, John Trask, Thomas Totney and Thomas Tillam, to each of whom a chapter is dedicated, Cottrell-Boyce sets out to explain why this eccentric tendency emerged in early seventeenth-century England. In doing so, he takes inspiration from Zygmunt Baumann’s concept of ‘allosemitism’: the idea that anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism alike are based on the assumption that Jewish people and culture are fundamentally ‘other’ and necessarily different from the mainstream. Applying this conceptual framework to the ‘Judaising’ voices within English Puritanism, Cottrell-Boyce argues that they adopted Jewish religious customs primarily ‘as a designation of difference or resistance’ (p. 3). To that extent, he suggest, ‘Judaizing functioned as a component of a typically godly “ethic of separation,” or, to use a form of expression proper to the period, an ethic of “singularity”’ (p. 4).

Cottrell-Boyce considers – and dismisses – the various explanations that have been offered by scholars for the ‘Judaising’ tendency within English Puritanism. Some have suggested that positive interaction between English Protestants and English Jewish communities gave rise to it. Cottrell-Boyce argues, against this, that there is little evidence of such contact in the cases he considers, and that, in any case, such contact did not usually lead to a positive evaluation of Jewish religious customs. Other scholars have seen ‘Judaising’ as a conscious critique of the *status quo*, designed to question and therefore to facilitate change in established social and religious institutions. Cottrell-Boyce concedes that these tendencies were a form of opposition to the *status quo*, but underlines that the ‘figures with whom this study is concerned were not primarily concerned with affecting change in the actions of the majority. They were concerned with distinguishing themselves *from* the majority’ (p. 12). As a result, the ‘Judaising’ phenomenon cannot be straightforwardly considered as a societal or religious critique.

It has also been suggested that the ‘Judaising’ phenomenon was the result of early modern scholarly Hebraism and the philo-Semitism that emerged from it.

Cottrell-Boyce points out, however, that such philo-Semitism tended to draw a sharp distinction between the moral and ceremonial aspects of the Jewish Law. ‘Those who were enamoured of the project of reuniting “enlightened” Jews and Christians around a “natural” moral religion’, he notes, ‘were equally disdainful of the kind of ceremonies that Traske, Totney and Tillam adopted’ (p. 16). Another suggested explanation for the ‘Judaising’ tendency is the mid-seventeenth-century rise in a Christian apocalypticism that placed the Jews at the centre of the eschatological drama. Cottrell-Boyce responds, however, that such Judaeocentric eschatology tended actually to deepen the sense of the divide between Christians and Jews, rather than encouraging any kind of assimilation. The final suggested explanation for ‘Judaising’ that Cottrell-Boyce addresses is the proposal that it was the consequence of a literalist reading of Scripture. Cottrell-Boyce notes, however, that the central figures of his study did not favour a literalist reading of Scripture, whereas other writers who did, did not encourage the adoption of Jewish ceremonies.

Having dismantled these alternative explanations, Cottrell-Boyce turns instead to consider the ‘Judaising’ phenomenon in specific reference to the Puritan identity from which it emerged. Drawing particularly on the scholarship of Peter Lake, he underlines that the distinction between the godly and the ungodly, the elect and the reprobate, was central to the Puritan conception of religion, and that the godly were frequently concerned with discovering evidence of this distinction. It is in this religious instinct, he argues, that one must look for the roots of the ‘Judaising’ tendency within English Puritanism. ‘If Puritanism was the religion of being “different from other people”’, he writes, ‘then this model should form the basis of any analysis of Puritan culture, not least the culture of Judaizing Puritans. Puritanism, in other words, should be primarily treated as a phenomenon concerned with the quality of “singularity”’ (p. 47). Cottrell-Boyce consequently suggests that figures such as Traske, Totney and Tillam did not urge the adoption of Jewish religious ceremonies because they felt that those ceremonies had any intrinsic religious value, but rather because they had a functional value in distinguishing the godly from their neighbours. This, in turn, assisted in the cultivation of the sense of assurance, which was so important to many Puritans. ‘For many’, he observes, ‘the development of strong relational bonds between themselves and their Godly peers provided the best “warrant” for their own salvation. Using various strategies, groups and individuals sought to strengthen these bonds through greater and greater accentuation of the difference between themselves and their “ungodly” neighbours’ (p. 57). The adoption of Jewish religious customs was one, albeit eccentric, way of achieving this end. The ‘Judaising’ tendency is therefore a comprehensible evolution of the religious culture of English Puritanism. Cottrell-Boyce’s thesis is undoubtedly interesting and persuasive, and his argument is informed by an impressive range of scholarship. This study will be of value to anyone interested in the ‘Judaising’ phenomenon, and the culture of English Puritanism more broadly.

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