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Puritanism and the Pursuit of Happiness: The Ministry and Theology of Ralph Venning, c.1621–1674. By **S. Bryn Roberts.**

Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015. xvii + 214 pp. \$115.00 cloth.

As S. Bryn Roberts importantly reminds us in his account of seventeenth-century Puritanism, most Puritans were primarily concerned with godliness. And godliness, for them, had a great deal to do with happiness. For Puritans, joy came from enjoying God, and enjoying God flowed from, and enabled, both gratitude and obedience. As Ralph Venning, the subject of Roberts's study, characteristically wrote: "He doth not enjoy much of God, who walkes not much with God; nor doth, nor can he walke much with God, who doth not enjoy much of God" (96). Citing passages such as these, Roberts turns us to the Puritan pursuit of happiness.

Such happiness came inflected by classical and medieval thought, and Roberts constantly invokes these longer traditions. Puritans liked the Stoics, especially Seneca. But the stoicism of Puritanism was not the absence of emotion; rather it was (ideally) the unflinching presence of a confident, striving, contented joy—*confident* because it rested in the assurance of grace and one's adoption into God's family; *striving* because it came through obedience, allowing believers to experience "a struggle against sin" as "a source of happiness" since "it signifies regeneration" (152); and *contented* because it looked past temporal ups and downs toward an eternal comfort, considering all the rest (including afflictions) a preparation for this lasting joy. As a result, Puritans could speak about happiness in ways that might combine it with earthly loss, distinguishing "true" joy from counterparts that chased after fleeting pleasures.

In laying out this scheme (though not in precisely this way), Roberts argues that Puritans were not necessarily prone to undue fear and anxiety, nor given to great experiments of asceticism and self-loathing. In fact, not only did Venning take self-love to be a help on the way to holiness—since a true love of self would paradoxically entail a primary love of God—he also criticized those who were overly ascetic: the suppression of enjoyment is "will-worship, and meer Epicurisme, where pain is pleasant; for as long as people impose it on themselves, they do not deny their own will, but fulfill it, and while they beat down the body, they do but puffe up the flesh" (111). Furthermore, Roberts does a good job emphasizing the communal elements of this Puritan happiness: conversion was a shared experience and grace was meant to build others up. In making the case for this Puritan happiness, Roberts helps demonstrate what made the movement so attractive to so many. Many who joined the "godly" did so because they were *drawn* to it, nurtured by it, found comfort and community in it. The terror of Puritanism should not be

forgotten (both for those within and for those outside its inner circle), but Roberts helps reveal its appeal.

At the same time, Roberts leaves several tensions unresolved, and some threaten the structure of the book itself. The book is repetitive and chopped into many subsections, but divides roughly between a biography of Venning (the first half) and an analysis of his works (the second half). In this division, the book seems uncertain whether it wants to revive an important figure (Ralph Venning) or an important topic (Puritan happiness). It is seldom clear, for example, what exactly Venning represents. He often stands for the blurred boundary between Puritanism and anti-Puritanism, but in the introduction, Roberts argues that Venning “warrants investigation in order to shed light on what Puritanism actually had to say about happiness” (5). Sometimes he is a model Puritan, sometimes a model of blurred boundaries, sometimes a Cambridge Platonist, sometimes something else. Naturally he could be all these things, but that does not necessarily clarify what Puritans thought about happiness. Perhaps the book should have either made a case for Venning as an important figure commenting on many intellectual developments (not just Puritan happiness), or it should have studied Puritan happiness more broadly (with Venning as one among many). Doing both ends up hampering Roberts’s account of happiness within and beyond Puritan theology and preaching. That topic—a history of happiness in Puritanism—would still be welcome, and it could build on what Roberts has begun.

In the course of his book, Roberts manages to touch on several topics that would well be worth following up. First, to what extent do Puritan diaries reflect these more appealing sides of Puritanism? Given what we have come to learn about Puritan sermons and treatises on subjects such as sympathy, love, mutual affection, joy, delight, and happiness, how can and should we re-approach diaries and journals? Do they confirm these sermons, or confute them? How do we understand the experiences that Puritans thought it most worthwhile to record? *God’s Caress* by Charles Lloyd Cohen remains an essential starting point, but a new, full-fledged emotional history of Puritanism could still be written.

Second, it would be worth tracing the influence of medieval piety and thought on the development of Puritanism. Roberts stresses the role of Thomas Aquinas and Thomas á Kempis for Venning. A further study might usefully ask: what is the relation between the *devotio moderna* (a pre-Reformation reform movement of laity in the lowlands, of which Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* is the most famous example) and the godly life of Puritans in Holland, England, and America? *The Imitation of Christ* was translated into English in 1568. A history of this book and its varieties of influence—including the Puritans’ own desire to imitate Christ—could be

very illuminating. More generally, medieval continuities with Puritanism have not been fully analyzed or emphasized.

In the end, Roberts offers a competent account of Ralph Venning and his views regarding happiness, contributing to a revived understanding of Puritanism from the inside out—Puritanism as it appealed to its participants. This study lays good groundwork for further important work to follow.

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A Path in the Mighty Waters: Shipboard Life & Atlantic Crossings to the New World. By **Stephen R. Berry**. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015. xiv + 320 pp. \$40.00 cloth.

In an age when we routinely cross the Atlantic Ocean in about eight hours and still complain about the food and drink, lack of leg room, and noisy passengers, it is probably impossible to comprehend fully what the crossing was like in the age of sail. Taking weeks, if not months, and facing the terror of storms, disease, and death, passengers on sailing ships were profoundly and forever affected by the ordeal. Naturally, the crossing had deep religious dimensions for passengers who suffered agonizing conditions and confronted the possibility of their death. This is the subject of Stephen R. Berry's *A Path in the Mighty Waters*. Berry focuses on the eighteenth century and relies on the detailed accounts of some of the more famous crossings, especially those of Charles Wesley, James Oglethorpe, Olaudah Equiano, John Adams, among others. Though the story of these and other Atlantic crossings have been told many times before, Berry makes a fresh contribution by focusing on the religious dimension of the experience and the more modern concerns with memory and identity.

Berry spends much of his attention on the human encounters aboard ship and how the crossing brought people together in unexpected ways. Anglicans, Anabaptists, Moravians, Methodists, and Quakers were forced into new relationships on the crossing. The relations between these pious passengers and the rough, foul-mouthed sailors are particularly interesting, for sailing culture could be shocking. The curious ritual of crossing the Tropic of Cancer for the first time, for example, entailed strange, sexually charged initiations of sailors—"insensible creatures" in Francis Asbury's view—that included cross-dressing, drunkenness, dunking, and other activities the appalled most passengers. "Gender confusion" was everywhere as sailors