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Increasingly historians are investigating the one historical certainty which has had no difficulty in resisting post-modernist relativism; here is a worthwhile anthology of recent research. Such a series of disparate case studies begs for a synthesising conclusion rather than the introduction which it gets, but the range is wide, covering traditional Catholicism, varieties of Protestantism and the Counter-Reformation. Particularly welcome in extending Western European perspectives is Graeme Murdock’s study of Calvinist funeral sermons in Transylvania, which became a genre of political comment: the close association of the Reformed Church with troubled and problematic princely power stimulated preachers to find all too apposite images for exhortation and reproof in the travails of Israel and Judah.

Introducing the pre-Reformation world, Samuel K. Cohn systematically reads testamentary data from Douai and Florence to challenge a whole series of older generalisations (notably from Jacques Chiffoleau) about attitudes to death and what they have to say about individualism. He points to the Black Death as a crucial divide in funeral practice, and suggests plausibly that a perceptible increase in detailed funeral provision and distinctive grave markers was in revulsion against the hurried mass burials often necessary in time of plague. Italian city
funeral custom laid greater emphasis on ancestry, while Douai shifted towards proclamation of ties to immediate family: these contrasting trends have little to do with individualism and much to do with the differing character of the ruling oligarchies in northern and southern cities. Clive Burgess revisits his work on the rich archive and busy devotional life of All Saints City, Bristol, and finds an insistence on communal remembrance, both of long-dead benefactors and of the liturgical detail of the festal year.

Nancy Caciola’s fascinating study of seances and possession cases in medieval Switzerland and Italy illustrates the problematic relationship between official and unofficial theologies. Official doctrine followed Augustine: the souls of the dead were decisively separated from this life, so possession must always be the work of demons, who gained entry as a result of individual sin. However, popular preference denied a necessary connection with moral lapses, and saw such activity as relating to unsatisfactory deaths which needed proper closure before a soul could enter the afterlife. It was hardly surprising that popular belief continued on its own way after Protestantism had condemned the old official theology, so Reformers had to negotiate anew with the alternative viewpoints. In fact, as both Bruce Gordon and Philip Soergel reveal, magisterial Reformers found it surprisingly easy to accommodate popular views on ghosts and associated prodigies, while illogically doing their best to keep in step with Augustine. Philipp Melanchthon was frank in saying that he had seen ghosts, and both he and Luther were also instrumental in rejecting Augustine’s scepticism about the significance of monstrous births, and in stimulating an abiding Lutheran interest in the theological significance of these phenomena. Bullinger’s successor as Antistes of Zurich, Ludwig Lavater, in his widely-translated Gespensterbuch (1569), reasserted the Augustinian position that apparitions were the work of good or bad angels, but he was also concerned to give people detailed instructions about how to cope with apparitions when they happened (the main principle being to leave interpretation to the experts, in other words clergy like himself). Protestants thus reaffirmed the importance of angels as spiritual forces in the world, all the more because they rejected the helping work of saints — an interesting reversal of the trend in medieval Europe, as sketched in Henry Mayr-Harting’s recent study Perceptions of Angels in History (Oxford, 1998).

Moving to the British Isles, Will Coster untangles the complicated evolution of the word ‘chrisom’ as a description for infants who died young, to show how popular belief negotiated official Protestant redefinitions of sacramental theology and baptismal practice. J.S.W. Helt demonstrates how English women, whom the law tended to deprive of much control over real property, generally took immense care over the detail of what goods they were able to bequeath — particularly to other female friends and kin. Andrew Spicer shows how the Church of Scotland sought to exclude the dead from congregational space in parish kirks (in notable contrast to the Dutch Reformed Church) and outlines the architectural consequences. Overall, in Reformed societies from England to Transylvania, the funeral was deliberately deprived of ceremonies which might suggest that the Church rather than God controlled the fate of the dying: compensatory drama and sense of occasion was provided by preaching, intended to make the living derive profit and instruction from the fate of the dead. Nevertheless, Hungarian ministers might also use their clerical prerogative flatly to refuse any ecclesiastical funeral to the morally suspect, resulting in insultingly perfunctory ‘ass’s funerals’.

Catholics as well as Reformed might exploit the funeral pulpit. From France, riven with confessional conflict, Larissa Taylor describes how funeral sermons, previously a minor genre within homiletics, became a forum for Catholic