

Andrew Bradstock,
Radical Religion in Cromwell's England.
A Concise History from the English Civil War to the End of the Commonwealth
(London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), xxvi+189 pages.

In seven crisply written chapters, Andrew Bradstock, currently Secretary for Church and Society with the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, outlines seven important communities that emerged in England during the religious and social chaos of the 1640s and 1650s: Baptists, Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, and Muggletonians. Bradstock's deft analyses of the origins of each of these groups and their ideological perspectives, which is based on a close reading of relevant primary sources, makes this volume both a joy to read and a ready reference tool for the student of this era. He rightly emphasizes that these groups, obscure though some of them may be (for example, the Muggletonians) are of ongoing significance for the very fact that they raised vital questions regarding liberty and equality before the law—increasingly an issue in western democracies let alone in other parts of the world—and that they remind us of “the power of religious ideas to inspire political action” (p.164)—a great reminder in a culture that deems religious convictions to be a smokescreen for other, more fundamental matters.

The first chapter, which deals with Baptists, will be of particular interest to readers of this website. It handles well all of the key issues about Baptists during the time period covered by the book, including, for example, their relationship to the Anabaptists of the previous century, their style of worship, and their “dipping” of believers. And, as Bradstock rightly points out, their democratic approach to leadership and emphasis on religious liberty made them appear to political authorities as “subversive and a threat to good order” (p.25), which is also a good reminder in a day when many equate being Baptist with political conservatism.

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