In this book Stephen Parker examines religion on the domestic front in Birmingham during the Second World War. Parker sees it as one piece in a jigsaw that attests to “the persistency of Christianity’s influence over British life and the dynamics of such popular belief and practice” (20). For, not surprisingly, he does not uncover the official Christianity of the creeds and the carefully balanced formulae of faith, but that whole range of beliefs, feelings, superstition, and uncertainties associated with what has come to be known variously as diffusive Christianity, folk Christianity, discursive Christianity, and implicit religion. In a study adapted from his Ph.D. thesis, Parker examines generic literature about Christianity in war-time Britain (21–30) and then sets the scene in Birmingham before the war (31–58). Birmingham was quite different from geographically proximate areas such as the Black Country. The formidable Christian élite of Birmingham — Quakers, Unitarians, the Carrs Lane Congregationalists, the idiosyncratic Bishop Barnes, etc. — are introduced and their dynasties identified. There were 584 churches, chapels, and meeting houses in 1938 Birmingham.

But it is when we get into oral history via some two-dozen interviews, and also into parish magazines, radio (e.g., the “radio padre” Ronald Selby Wright) and cinema that the study comes into its own. This begins with “popular religion and the experience of war” (59–120). We encounter people reflecting on sudden civilian death brought about by war, on their own mortality as they sat in air raid shelters, on fatalism in some, and belief in miracle (Dunkirk seen as this) by others. It sometimes meant “a revision of priorities, a change of values and an altering of self-conception” (78), often an increase in prayer. Parker also presents references to Spiritualism, White Eagle and the experience of pagans praying for deliverance from invasion or bombing. He identifies the survival of Birmingham Cathedral in the Blitz as a popularly hailed portent of deliverance — more helpful here might have been some comparison with Saint Pauls, London, and Exeter Cathedral and their impact on popular attitudes.

The churches’ ministry in wartime Birmingham is then examined (121–80) along with the churches’ vision of the post-war world (181–212). For historians of education, this section provides local material for the postwar vision that led to the Education Act 1944. A Birmingham essay competition revealed the enthusiasm for a religious provision in the curriculum. A contemporary strand of suspicion about the depth and validity of popular support for religion in school was also present. Parker concludes that popular religion was a vital component of national life during and for at least a decade after the war. Since 71.6 per cent of the UK population still identified with Christianity in the 2001 National Census, his thesis is not so contentious. He argues a strong case that secularisation had not eroded belief. The churches were “far from marginal” to Birmingham neighbourhood life, and the role of church workers during the blitz is particularly stressed as a neglected but significant dimension of the history of the war. Ironically, he argues, statutory RE may later have diminished church (Sunday School) contact for the young. But detailed examination of this hypothesis falls beyond the perimeters of his study.

This book is an invaluable local source, which could well be followed up by a parallel study either of the Black Country (strong non-conformist tradition, but no Chamberlains, Cadburys etc.) or another city such as Sheffield, in order to test the uniqueness of the Birmingham experience. Parker might have said more about declining church numbers before the war and examined more tenaciously the question,
did the war evoke distinctively Christian (or more diffusively religious) belief that was not there before 1939? But the story is well told, the interview extracts are helpful and not too discursive and the tightrope between the national scene and the Birmingham-specific scene is well walked. This reviewer looks forward to the sequel.

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This book deals with religious women, both Catholic women religious and religiously committed laywomen. The first contributor, Phil Kilroy, in “The writing of religious women’s history: Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779–1865)” draws on her searching biography, Madeleine Sophie Barat 1779–1865: A Life. Here, she seeks to situate Barat, founder of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, in the context of her time and, in particular, within the burgeoning new female religious communities in France from the early nineteenth century. By the time of her death in 1865, her institute numbered 3,359 members with eighty-nine houses spread across the world. Kilroy explores the inner personal journey of this gifted leader of women as key to the stature she attained.

Rosemary Raughter’s “Pious Occupations: Female Activism and the Catholic Revival in Eighteenth-Century Ireland” deals primarily with two notable women, Nano Nagle (1718–84) and Teresa Mulally (1728–1803), of Cork and Dublin respectively, who initiated education for poor children with accompanying social relief, when the penal laws were still on the statute books but were lapsing in practice. Where Nagle’s involvement led her to found the later international Presentation institute, Mulally remained a laywoman but was able to entrust the future of her work to the Presentation Sisters. Suellen Hoy, in her “Discovering Irish Nuns in the Nineteenth-Century United States: The Case of Chicago,” deals with the many works of social alleviation, as well as education, undertaken in Chicago by Irish Mercy Sisters who first arrived there in 1846. She focuses particularly on the capable leadership of Sister Agatha O’Brien who laid the foundation of Chicago’s Mercy Hospital and the academy which has become Saint Xavier’s University.

Janice Holmes’s “Gender, Public Disorder and the Salvation Army in Ireland, 1880–82” and Myrtle Hill’s “Women’s Work for Women: The Irish Presbyterian Zenana Mission, 1874–1914” retrieve the committed women who undertook these missions — the thirty-five Englishwomen who sought to introduce the Salvation Army into Ulster and encountered unforeseen opposition from the religious denominations entrenched there, and the 101 Irishwomen of the Zenana mission who went as teachers and medical workers to India and later China. Both raise issues of class, gender, and ethnicity, while revealing the women’s enterprise, given the restrictions, as well as advantages, their gender imposed. Maria Luddy, in “Convent Archives as Sources for Irish History,” lists aspects of Ireland’s social history on which convent records can throw fuller light, e.g., the network of families and their resources which produced the convent vocations, as well as detail on prevailing social conditions.

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