
One must persist with this book. It contains a mass of information, which most will find difficult to absorb in one sitting; and so reading a section (not even a whole chapter) at a time is recommended. The theoretical agenda in
the Introduction pre-conditions the detail and complexity of the book’s contents. I must say I doubt whether I have read a more sophisticated statement about the theoretical state of play in the historical study of gender and sexual relations than I found in that Introduction. We are quickly dunked into Foucauldian post-modernist historiography, post-colonialism, Gramsci’s hegemony theory, the Russian Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse, and the basics of queer studies. The theoretical backdrop is so impressive, though, that it was hard imagining how the rest of the book could possibly live up to the initial expectations, because evidence about the gender issues of early modern times is known to be very partial or elusive.

Be the problems as they may be, however, Wiesner-Hanks walks beside the morass of data with finesse and commendable judgement. After a survey assessment of gender relations in the Christian tradition from Antiquity to the fourteenth century, taking the Jewish and Graeco-Roman backgrounds into account, and comparing Orthodox and Western Catholic attitudes, she proceeds to the main body of materials. The chronological focus is on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Continental Protestantism and Catholicism are treated in turn, with some space given to the rise of Russian pre-eminence in the Orthodox world during that period. Then attention is turned in the last three chapters to the management of sexuality in earlier colonial situations: in Latin America under the Spanish and Portuguese; Africa and Asia, with a special interest in Iberian missionaries in India, Japan and the Philippines; and North America under the British and French. Attitudes to clerical sexuality, marriage, divorce, fornication and illegitimacy, abortion, prostitution, same-sex relations, sodomy, and witchcraft are pursued throughout the book, and in colonial situations the degree of allowance of concubinage or polygyny receives considerable airing.

Unfortunately Wiesner-Hanks does not show a commanding knowledge of any languages other than English, so that where one hopes to find her own use of original textual materials one has to admit to disappointment. Yet she backs up almost every assessment she makes with appeals to important specialist studies. Her bibliographies after each chapter abound with new research on gender studies, and if any book lays bare the research revolution going on in combining historical, religious and gender studies, this is surely the one. She has a good sense of revisionist scholarship, debunking anti-Catholic myths about the Catholic inquisitions sending scores of witches to their deaths when, out of hundreds of attempts at trial, only a handful resulted in execution. An inquisitorial concern to stamp out homosexuality and sodomy, however, particularly of young boys, is highlighted but considered with astuteness as part of the early modern Reformation impetuses to “enforce Christian standards” in the face of lingering corruptions and new cross-cultural temptations. The general thesis of the book is that the work of clerical bodies and theologians in the early modern period to provide disciplinary and regulatory solutions to curb the desires of the flesh was determinative for the
modern world in general. The interiorisation of restraint, strong in Protestantism, is part of the story, if rather underdone analytically. One interesting surprise, too, is just how widespread concubinage was as a practice outside Christendom, with many women inferiorised, used, and left without social futures; and how missionary Christianity had already begun to make an impact on this scene between 1500 and 1700, foreshadowing the widespread decline of concubinage and polygyny over the last two hundred years.

Over all, scholarly accuracy prevails. There are only odd “slip-ups.” To illustrate: John Chrysostom is made patriarch of Antioch when it should have been Constantinople (p. 49); Jean Bodin is left resolutely Catholic when he secretly converted to Judaism (p. 128); and in two proximate errors we see the Hindu warrior Kshatrigas as Kyhatriyas, and Spaniards as Spainards (191, 193). More substantively, one is left unconvinced at times that Wiesner-Hanks has a good sense of the dynamics of pre-Christian warrior cultures and the revenge syndromes applying in them; and for this reason she misses seeing how missionary tactics over both peace and improved gender relations were related. She barely addresses the comparative question of shame and guilt cultures; and perhaps in the end overestimates the capacity for any institution to “control” sexuality (see 153). The extent to which sexual impulses were contained with outlets—in the risqué elements of medieval iconography, jokes, carnivals, etc.—is inadequately estimated. But these criticisms will appear as quibbles after a patient reading of an important volume.

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