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## Dominc Erdozain, "The Problem of Pleasure. Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion" (2010)

Maurits, Alexander

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



## Book reviews

Dominic Erdozain, *The Problem of Pleasure. Sport, Recreation and the Crisis of Victorian Religion* (Studies in Modern British Religious History, 22), Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010; 304 pp.; ISBN 978-1843835288; £ 60,00.

The position of Christianity, or perhaps more accurate, Christendom in nineteenth century Western and Northern Europe has been described in terms of secularization.<sup>1</sup> The problem, to put it bluntly, was of course discussed by contemporary commentators, and during the course of the long twentieth century the secularization of Western and Northern Europe has been explained from different sociological, economical, and historical perspectives. In Sweden, as in other parts of Europe, scholars like Hugh McLeod, Hartmut Lehmann and Callum G. Brown have influenced many Church historians. With his book *The Problem of Pleasure*, Church historian Dominic Erdozain contributes to the recent debate among theologians and historians on the impact of secularization.

The eruptive role of the Evangelical revival within the British society during the nineteenth century is well-known. If thinking about the devoutness, the eagerness, and the activism that marked this movement one could easily depict it as a spiritual revolution.

In his book, Erdozain shows that the revulsion towards different kinds of recreational activities (for example sports) was heavily manifested within the evangelical movement. As time passed this seems to have changed, and as a consequence of the activism that distinguished the movement, sports and other kind of amusements became an important component of the Christian life in many congregations and denominations. There was a growing feeling that acceptance of, for example, sporting activities would help to promote the Christian cause and boost the individual Christian's belief.

In many European societies, and particularly within the evangelical movements, the latter half of the nineteenth century was characterized by a preoccupation with issues concerning moral standards. Both in countries such as Great Britain and Sweden, the moral issues and the emphasis on good character was part of the discourse, i.e. this was part of the social discipline of the time. This discourse, even if that is a concept which Erdozain seems to avoid, influenced the evangelical movement and resulted in a moralism that became extremely stark. One of Erdozain's more important observations is that this notion of intense moralism lost its religious foundation overtime, and that this actually prompted secularization. In other words, the evangelicals laid the

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<sup>1</sup> A Swedish version of this review has previously been published in *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift* 2013, the annual journal of the Swedish Ecclesiastical History Society.

pediment for a social ethic for which an overarching theological framework was unnecessary. To put it directly, one could say that salvation became a worldly affair. In that view, the activism of the evangelical movement had an intrinsic value regardless of the personal belief in God among its followers. Paradoxically, initiatives as Christian Manliness/Muscular Christianity, represented by Charles Kingsley, Thomas Arnold and others, which aimed to counteract the de-Christianization of society, thus paved the way for secularization.

Since it includes an in-depth discussion on the processes of secularization and historiography, Erdozain's book is of vast importance even for non-British Church historians. In a very pervasive manner, Erdozain argues that the result of the immense criticism of the old secularization paradigm actually has resulted in another form of reductionism. It seems as if scholars have found it so appealing to falsify the narrative of a continuous process of secularization, that they as a substitute for an old meta-narrative have created a new one. According to Erdozain, it is a goal in itself for these scholars to prove the societal and cultural role of religion. Erdozain is of the opinion that this is a definition of religion which is too wide. He finds it meaningless to measure all forms of religion according to the same yardstick, and he emphasizes that there is a qualitative difference between the Great Awakenings of the nineteenth century and present day notions of believing without belonging or *New Age* (to take some examples).

According to Erdozain there is a need for a more theological point of departure, and he finds it important to use qualitative criteria to discuss the process of secularization. Whether or not there has been a secularization of society cannot be defined from cultural or contextual perspectives exclusively, since it results in historicism. In addition scholars need to adapt certain fundamental theological premises, e.g. belief in God and Church attendance. Thus it is important to discuss the impact of Christian ideas, dogmas and values. Secularization does, if one concurs with Erdozain, not occur when religion ceases to be a cultural fundament. Rather it is the opposite way around; secularization takes place when the individual belief has become irrelevant and religion has been reduced to a strictly cultural phenomenon.

Since the book is part of the series *Studies in Modern British Religious History* it comes as no surprise that it lacks an international perspective. Even so, it is easy to see similarities between the situation in Victorian England and other geographical areas and religious contexts. Since the end of the nineteenth century the process has been similar in many countries in Western and Northern Europe. A more theologically based Christianity has been reduced and replaced by a more diffuse form of Christianity focusing more on ethics than on what has been considered the traditional content of the Christian belief system. A German and Swedish example that could fit in this frame would be the development of the so called *Kulturprotestantismus* and its long-run consequences.

Erdozain is convincing, but he is also arguing for his thesis in a polemic and almost bantering way. His indictment of colleagues is rather harsh. His way of expressing himself comes through as somewhat awkward to a Swede longing for consensus; though at the same time it's catchy and triggers the reader to continue. However, it is important to keep in mind that Erdozain's interpretation of the past is biased, especially since he emphasizes the need to value the religious change of the nineteenth and twentieth century from a theological perspective. From my point of view, a discussion on what is included in this perspective more than traditional theological dogma is lacking.

*The Problem of Pleasure* pays attention to several important questions regarding religious change. Of course it highlights the relation between sports and recreation on the one hand and religion on the other. More importantly, it raises questions concerning historiography as well as the pre-understanding and epistemological starting points upon which each researcher dealing with history needs to reflect. In addition we have Erdozain's important call for the significance of evident qualitative premises when it comes to understanding, explaining, and assessing the religious change that has characterized Modernity. In that way, this book about British evangelicals during the nineteenth century has a wider scope. Thus, Erdozain's research could be an interesting point of departure for Church historians in many other European countries.

Dr. Alexander Maurits  
[alexander.maurits@teol.lu.se](mailto:alexander.maurits@teol.lu.se)

Simon J.G. Burton, *The Hallowing of Logic: The Trinitarian Method of Richard Baxter's Methodus Theologiae* (Brill's Series in Church History and Religious Culture, 57), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012; 415 pp.; ISBN 9789004226401; € 105,00.

Recently several studies of Puritan theology have been published, such as Joel R. Beeke's and Mark Jones's *A Puritan Theology* and Christopher Cleveland's research regarding the influence of Thomas Aquinas on John Owen. Simon Burton's study of the intellectual roots of Richard Baxter's theology is part of this resurgence of Puritan research. As is true for Owen's practical works, Baxter's practical works not only greatly influenced the English world, but also the Netherlands and Germany. His theological works, however, have remained less known than those of Owen. This is also true regarding the intellectual roots of his idiosyncratic Puritan theology.

Burton's research has compensated considerably for this noteworthy scholarly deficiency by his analysis of Baxter's *magnum opus*, his *Methodus*