lematic book, in more than one sense. First, it repeatedly sees Russell drawing upon modern parallels and his own parliamentary experience. This might be considered appropriate, given that a fairly considerable part of his later life was spent in the House of Lords rather than in libraries and record offices, but is nevertheless striking. Russell himself acknowledges that this might be considered troubling, but his efforts to defend the practice—by accusing Geoffrey Elton of ostrich-like tendencies in denying the relevance of modern comparisons—represents an unconvincing response to those who will accuse an arch revisionist of committing the sin of anachronism. Secondly, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Russell is determined to under-emphasise the change in his ideas. Thus, while many will welcome the way in which he has conceded territory to his critics, they may also wonder whether enough has been done to make this clear. What makes this book feel so disappointing is that, by making the argument so dense, by offering so little help to readers who are not already specialists, and by studiously avoiding direct historiographical engagement, it is likely to find only a very limited audience.


The fourteen essays produced in this volume revolve around the premise made by John Morrill in 1983 that the English Civil War was the last war of religion, rather than the first modern revolution. Although Morrill claims that this was nothing more than a “throw-away” line aimed at undermining prevalent Marxist readings of the mid-seventeenth century, he is right to suggest that it has become the “load-bearing wall” of this present volume (307). The contributors successfully illustrate how far studies of the mid-seventeenth century have developed over the last quarter-century, throwing light on those areas where politics and religion met. The essays presented engage with what Glenn Burgess calls “one of the most stubborn of historiographi-
cal puzzles” (xiii) with exceptional clarity, showing the intricate and shifting ways in which religion and politics interacted.

A number of the volume’s authors show how the boundaries between religious and secular matters constantly blurred in this period. John Coffey displays that while deploying language associated with Roman images of slavery and redemption, Parliamentarians regularly invoked references to the Book of Exodus. The experience of warfare, and victory in the case of the Parliamentarians, was simultaneously couched in classical and religious imagery. Charles Prior’s essay earlier in the volume, shows how the application of the ecclesiastical Canons of 1640 raised issues of sovereignty as opponents disapproved of the Canons being given force of law without Parliamentary consent. Prior concludes by stressing that as the Royal Supremacy in the English Church had blurred the distinctions between ecclesiastical and secular matters, the Reformation was “a fundamental driver of political thought.” The political machinations of the mid-seventeenth century provided the context for this relationship to be challenged.

A number of notable contributions illustrate that the idea of a religious war was largely unacceptable to contemporaries looking at the conflict through the just war tradition. Here we again see the blurring of secular and spiritual concerns. Glenn Burgess illustrates in his essay that religious wars were perceived as unjust and motivated by excessive zeal. He notes how Royalist polemicists portrayed Parliament’s war as one of “fanaticism … while portraying the king as the defender of order and decency” (178). Rachel Foxley observes in her excellent piece that even Cromwell, the supposed “prime exemplar” of religious motivation, “held out against the notion that resistance on grounds of religion could be legitimate” (214). While this is startling, Foxley continues her analysis to suggest that those who were deeply spiritual were likely to assess how their “secular struggle would serve the cause of religion,” rather than the other way round (218). This shows the idea of appearing legitimate and spiritually moderate was essential in prosecuting political aims in the mid-seventeenth century.

One of the volume’s most notable achievements is in its reconsidering of the idea of anti-papacy, or the fear of internal and foreign Catholic conspiracy. Michael Braddick suggests that anti-Papacy was a negotiated concept, “only fixed in its meaning at the most abstract
level”, with “its meaning and value … dynamic and shifting” (132).
Furthermore, Braddick suggests that we should see opposition to Catholicism as the counterpoint to “the attendant threat” of excessive, Puritan, zeal (131). The contribution of Jeffrey Collins, though focusing on post Restoration events, shows how anti-Catholic polemic post-1660 had to deal with English Catholics who had openly negotiated with the republican regime. Such negotiation caused considerable tensions amongst the Catholic community itself (289). These contributions depict Catholicism as a variable concept, not universally deployed as a negative stereotype, but negotiated in different polemical contexts.

Morrill’s closing appraisal of the volume provides a significant review of the preceding articles, as well as showing the reader how his own thinking has developed over the years. Morrill is quick to point out that, while his own research has come to focus on a more inclusive British and Irish model of the Civil Wars, the editors of this volume “retreated to England in giving a title to this book” (322). This is indeed disappointing, but by sticking to the volume’s brief, the contributors allude to the impact of religious thinking elsewhere in Britain and Ireland, particularly the Kirk in Scotland, on the religious situation in England. While this partly vindicates Morrill’s argument for a more integrative, pan-British (and Irish), approach to the history of this period, it also raises questions over the possibility of presenting the histories of England, Scotland and Ireland as a cohesive whole, without one territory taking over.

This volume underlines the expertise and vigour Professor John Morrill has offered early-modern studies in the last five decades; his ability to stimulate and participate in lively discussions of the period. The breadth of the contributions in this collection need to be seen alongside the recent festschrift presented to Morrill by Michael Braddick and David L. Smith (The Experience of Revolution in Stuart Britain and Ireland). Both works provide a rich resource in assessing the intersection between politics and religion in this period, in addition to displaying very clearly the complexities of religious and political identities during the British Civil Wars.