

Rodda, Joshua. *Public Religious Disputation in England, 1558–1626* (St Andrews Studies in Reformation History), Farnham, Ashgate, 2014; hardback; pp. 252; R.R.P. £70.00; ISBN 9781472415554.

Joshua Rodda's new monograph – a revised and expanded version of his doctoral thesis – aims to provide a specialised analysis of 'the history of public religious disputation, as a practice and phenomenon that shaped religious controversy, and was ultimately broken down by it' (p. 5). The book traces the foundations of public religious disputation in post-Reformation England, from the accession of Elizabeth I, through to its peak during the reign of James VI & I, to its eventual decline in the 1620s. Rodda's thesis rests on the observation that those who engaged in public religious disputation believed 'beyond doubt that their truth would be confirmed by formal and rational argument' (p. 5).

The book is divided into six chronologically arranged chapters. The first sets out Rodda's framework for analysis and the definitions of his terms. His definition of disputation as 'a manifestation of scholarship and scholarly [page 349] interaction' (p. 7) is curious at first glance, but is quickly contextualised, particularly when he describes the differences between an academic debate and a religious disputation. The chapter also provides a brief background to the Reformation in England, and the place of disputation in religious circles.

The second chapter provides contemporary examples of disputations in order to 'reconstruct the process as envisaged and deployed in these events' (p. 37). Rodda skilfully explains the roles of the opponent, respondent, moderator, and question in a disputation. He then devotes the rest of the chapter to the actual disputation itself. He recreates how questions were answered, showing how logic, scripture, the Church Fathers, contemporary authorities, and virtuous pagans (particularly Aristotle) were all combined to create a defence. The chapter closes with a discussion of the rules in a disputation, the ideal venue, and the conventions surrounding the publication of accounts, with Rodda making the distinction between the actual disputation and the enlarged argument that was often included in the published account.

The third chapter is arguably the book's most interesting. Rodda details the uses and abuses of religious disputations from Mary I's reign (technically outside the book's timeframe, but contextualised well) through to that of James VI & I. He discusses the consequences of a poorly argued disputation response, and also the various canonical and legal ramifications of a disputation that moved beyond the edges of academic debate.

This theme is continued in the fourth chapter, where Rodda provides source-based examples of public religious disputation. He particularly focuses on how disputations were answered, and also how tactics differed when debating Puritans. This chapter serves to demonstrate that 'disputation went beyond mere display: it could teach' (p. 130).

The fifth chapter focuses on the increasing attraction of lay audiences to public religious disputations. Rodda uses the example of the January 1604 Hampton Court Conference, convened by James VI & I, which provided leading Puritans an opportunity to publicly defend their positions. James's active involvement in the debates – despite technically being the impartial moderator – demonstrates that the academic rigour of religious disputations was disappearing. Ultimately, lay participation in disputation echoed the Protestant ideal that all believers read, and engaged with, the Bible.

The final chapter charts the decreasing value academics placed on public disputations as a result of this lay involvement. Non-conformists, who did not rely so heavily on the logic and reasoned arguments that had previously characterised academic debates, increasingly used public disputations to question the Church of England and engage directly with their audiences. This reached a point in the early 1620s where 'the dominant individuals in the [page 350] church no longer saw disputation as an antidote to controversy, but as a more direct – and more damaging – variety of it' (p. 191).

Overall, the book is well written and well researched, but its density makes for a challenging read. Curiously, Rodda provides no justification for his reliance on the King James Version of the Bible for scriptural references: given that this version was in circulation for only a sixth of the period the book covers, it is a problematic choice. *Public Religious Disputation in England* will be of greatest value to those with a solid grounding in Reformation history, but it will appeal generally to all scholars of early modern history.

Aidan Norrie, *University of Otago*