

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PARISH RELIGION

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THE WORLD OF THE PARISH

That compact expression, 'self-government at the king's command', frequently applied to Tudor governance, might, by April 1559, equally be applied to parish religion for the Elizabethan Act of Supremacy brought the Church once again under the authority of the Crown, yet the practice of religion at the level of the parish was deeply informed by local customs, identities, boundaries and office-holders. The parish was, of course, the smallest and most basic unit of governance within the English church. The term itself seems not to have developed until the thirteenth century in England although related terms such as 'priest shire' and 'shrift shire' date back to the eleventh or late tenth century, but an Old English equivalent for *parochia* cannot be found. Once received, however, the term proved remarkably fertile, spawning a variety of combinations. In early modern England there were more than 9,000 parishes spread across the country with their parish churches, parish priests or ministers, parish clerks, parish bounds, parish constables, parish wardens, parishioners, parish ales, parish poor, parish meetings, parish rates and other parish coinages. Parish lands were lands owned by the parish; the moon might be referred to as a parish lantern, and if something was done on the cheap it was parish-rigged. In its broadest sense, however, the parish referred to a unit of governance that embraced both the sacred and secular, the ecclesiastical and the civil, although the growth of civil responsibilities placed upon the parish was one of the major developments of the sixteenth century, enshrined most clearly in the passage of the Elizabethan poor laws. Yet, where parish rates or a parish clerk can be clearly defined, the limits of parish religion are ambiguous and complicated still further by the variety of parishes found within England.

The overlap with civil administration and local government often owed much to the fact that parishes tended to be coterminous with townships, but this was more true of southern England than it was of the north, where parish boundaries often sprawled over a number of townships. The huge parish of Prescott in Lancashire encompassed sixteen separate townships. Historians and historical geographers often speak of open and closed parishes, referring to those parishes which were large in size, heavily populated with dispersed settlements and loose governing

arrangements located in areas of extensive commons, fens, forests or uplands. Closed parishes were commonly lowland parishes with concentrated landholding, small in size and population, possessing nucleated settlements and restricted parish oligarchies. The typology, as Keith Wrightson has confessed, is crude, but one that contains much truth. By 1500, there were, moreover, enormous differences to be found between the experiences of urban parishioners in London, Bristol or Norwich and those of parishioners in parts of rural Lancashire or Cumbria. Further complicating these structural differences was the fact that by the time Elizabeth came to the throne two generations of religious change and a range of fiercely contested opinion and belief might be found within local communities. And the worship of the parish church was something quite distinct from the worship of the chapel royal, the great cathedrals or collegiate churches or what one might have found in Oxbridge colleges or the chapels of the Inns of Court.

In spite of all these variations, there can be little doubt that throughout the reign of Elizabeth I the parish, with its focus in the parish church, was of central importance to the lives of most men and women. The church was often the most substantial and permanent building in most villages and the centre of much activity. It acted as school, storehouse, arsenal, fire station and perhaps even library. Parish services were not only occasions for communal worship but also an important forum for news and information. Announcements about strayed animals might follow the proclaiming of wedding banns. Manor court orders were published in the church, documents were kept in the parish chest, rents were sometimes paid in the parish porch, and the church was the venue for meetings of vestrymen, churchwardens, overseers of the poor, petty sessions, the archdeacon's court which perambulated and sometimes meetings of quarter sessions. It remained the venue for elections to office, audit meetings, business transactions and a range of festive and communal celebrations, although these became rarer in some centres and regions as the years passed. The legislative zeal of the Tudors placed an increasingly heavy burden of secular legislation on the shoulders of the parish. The thin end of the wedge came with the passing of statutes concerning the repair of roads and bridges and the extermination of vermin, such as moles and hedgehogs. The wedge itself came in 1598 with the passing of the first comprehensive poor-law requirements that laid the responsibility for poor relief and for the punishment of vagabonds squarely in the hands of the parish and its officers. In spite of these challenges, the parish endured. Although the ancient claim to comprehensiveness – that everyone was a parishioner and that the parish embraced all – had, by 1700, been irreversibly destroyed, many of the elements of the Elizabethan parish would live on well into the nineteenth century.

While much of this world has been lost, a great deal of information can be gathered about the lives of parishioners, especially from the records produced by the higher officers and courts of the Church. Consistory court material, the records of the archdeacon's court, popularly known as the bawdy court due to the preponderance of allegations concerning sexual offences, and the records of visitations, all cast much light on the lives of both parsons and parishioners. The volume edited by J. S. Purvis entitled *Tudor Parish Documents of the Diocese of York* (1948) relied almost entirely on such material. Yet the recorded descriptions of the parish church (the chancel is not whitened nor paved in such decent sort as it

ought to be), behaviour of parishioners (squabbling and fighting over pews) and clerical standards (their curate does not celebrate and read the divine service plainly and distinctly), unsurprisingly reflected the life of the parish seen primarily from the perspective of those in authority. The parish itself produced two main records: parish registers and churchwardens' accounts. Parish registers, records of the christenings, burials and marriages in the parish, ordered to be kept from 1538 onwards, survive for many parishes from the latter part of Elizabeth's reign. Only about one-eighth of all English parishes have registers that date back to 1538, and most of these are later copies. The value of parish registers cannot be overstated and it is from such sources that the population history of England and Wales, with all the attendant questions concerning fertility rates, illegitimacy, social mobility and family structure, has been carefully reconstructed. The other body of material is churchwardens' accounts. These are the records of parochial income and expenditure, a seemingly tedious subject but one which historians have been increasingly exploiting in their search for evidence about parish life.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE PROBLEM OF CONFORMITY

Over the past fifty years, a growing body of scholarship has appeared that, in a variety of ways, often more obliquely than directly, bears upon the experience of English parishioners from the opening years of the sixteenth century to the close of the seventeenth. For too long parish life was treated as something quaint and of antiquarian interest, an approach found in the limited study by Tindal Hart *The Man in the Pew, 1558-1660* (1966). With the explosion of interest in social history, the parish attracted the interest of social and economic historians asking questions about social relations and the plight of the poor. It has been brought under scrutiny by historians interested in state formation and popular protest. In a famous, if debated, construction, Christopher Hill argued that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the early modern English parish was secularised, and parish religion was the essential context for Keith Thomas's and Alan MacFarlane's quite different treatments of allegations of witchcraft and the evidence of popular belief. For a variety of reasons and with a multiplicity of approaches and questions, the separate strands of historical inquiry found a locus in the parish and its sources. Chief among these approaches was an interest in religious change at the level of local communities, if not initiated by A. G. Dickens, then certainly propelled by him, as his call for an account of the Reformation that sought to address the concerns of ordinary men and women was taken up by a generation of researchers who combed through wills, probate inventories, parish registers, church court cases and parish accounts. Although much of this work was initially organised around the concept of county communities, an important collection of essays edited by Susan Wright marked a shift towards a closer engagement with parish religion. Parishioners and parish activities loom large in works as diverse as Eamon Duffy's important study of late-medieval religious culture, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992); Patrick Collinson's depiction of *The Religion of Protestants* (1982); Beat Kümin's analysis of *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400-1560* (1996); Judith Maltby's *Prayer Book and People*

Elizabethan and Early Stuart England (1998); Christopher Haigh's *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven* (2007) and the work done by Christopher Marsh on church seating, Steve Hindle on Rogationtide processions and Jeremy Boulton on parish participation in communion services, to name but a few. An attempt to think more systematically about how these varied approaches might complement and inform each other can be seen in the way in which historians as distinct as Steve Hindle, Beat Kümin and Peter Marshall – all based at Warwick University – have collaborated to host an important annual conference on the parish and parish material, insisting upon the importance of comparative history and interdisciplinary approaches.

It is more than a little ironic, therefore, that *Elizabethan* parish religion, as distinct from popular religion or early modern mentalities, has struggled to find a place in this flourishing field. There is no modern study of the activities and experiences of Elizabethan parishioners as a subject in its own right. There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that some of the best work on the early modern parish is not much interested in the particular problems of the Elizabethan church. Eschewing older historiographical approaches and chronologies, the tendency is to think more broadly about questions of social and cultural change in ways that are no longer bound to the particular problems of Elizabethan ecclesiastical and political history. Keith Wrightson's seminal essay on the politics of the parish, which responded in part to Patrick Collinson's call to examine the 'social depth of politics' in local communities, is a particularly notable example of this trend. The second reason is bound up with what might be called the problem of conformity. Revisionism and the effect of the local turn in Reformation scholarship have stressed the conservative character of much of English society. While the weight of historical opinion currently favours the notion that England's parishes did not become Protestant until twenty or so years into the reign of Elizabeth I, paradoxically, some of the most interesting recent work on local responses to reformation statutes focuses on the earlier reigns of Edward VI and Mary I. The effect of this is to reinforce the marginalisation of Elizabethan parochial life. It is striking that Eamon Duffy's treatment of the Devonshire parish of Morebath has very little to say about the Elizabethan experiences of its conforming priest, Sir Christopher Trychay. The central narratives for the Elizabethan decades are still dominated by terms of establishment and opposition – the creation of an 'Elizabethan settlement' and the emergence of Catholic recusants and zealous puritans, dissenting movements at opposite ends of a religious spectrum that shared a common opposition to Elizabeth's *via media*. Not least among the difficulties of this powerful myth is the way that it either dismisses or sidelines the experiences of most parishioners who quietly and dutifully conformed to the terms of Elizabethan religion.

The problem of conformity has always had a confessional and polemical edge. Debates about Elizabethan parish life began in the sixteenth century and centred on the problem of reformation. For Catholic polemicists such as John Rastell, services in the vernacular had divided congregations of the 'simple folk' into two; there were those of 'the old making' who understood 'the sentences but by halves' bearing 'very litle away' and those of 'the new making' who listened only 'to mainteine talke there upon, or to appose the priest, or to judge the priest, or condemne the church of God'.¹ Twenty years later, godly preachers such as George

Gifford and Arthur Dent castigated what they believed was widespread ignorance of basic Christian doctrine. As far as true repentance was concerned, George Gifford wrote that 'the greatest multitude of men' were 'as blind as beetles in this point', but these were necessary and polemical positions in their campaign to establish support for a preaching ministry and not descriptions of parish life.² An earlier generation of reformers, men such as Edward Dering, were convinced that the central obstacles to effective reform were greedy impropiators and patrons, careless ministers, magistrates and even the Queen herself. Conforming parishioners were used as the proverbial nose of wax, twisted to suit a variety of positions. Early in the twentieth century, the subject was still deeply coloured by confessional positions. In 1914, W. P. M. Kennedy published a small work entitled *Parish Life under Queen Elizabeth: An Introductory Study*. Kennedy was an Irish Catholic, an expert in ecclesiastical and constitutional history and friend and collaborator of W. H. Frere, who had published his own survey of Elizabethan and Jacobean church history in 1904. Both works were full-blooded confessional histories, Catholic ripostes to the work of Mandell Creighton. Apart from a grudging sympathy for Matthew Parker, Kennedy struggled to find anything good to say about his subject. The royal supremacy had reduced parochial life to a 'dreary round of inquiry and inquisition'. Elizabethan bishops were men on the make; the clergy were 'as colourless, as factious and as incompetent as their bishops'. Parish worship 'may be summed up as disintegrated and drastic — the cause of serious parochial friction'. Fundamentally, the mass of ordinary people were bewildered, having lost their moral compass:

a generation brought up in an atmosphere of religious movements and dragooned from one religious camp to another was hardly likely to know what to do, or say or believe. There was no security that their acceptance of a new state of affairs today would be pleasing to the government tomorrow. This instability and lack of certainty produced a wide spirit of moral weakness which is too often forgotten in studying Elizabethan England.

And in a sentence that foreshadowed a great deal of historical inquiry over the coming century, Kennedy argued that 'the strong men in reality were the conscientious puritans and Catholics who had the courage to refuse a position which gradually made itself secure'.³ In all this, Kennedy was echoing the judgement of his colleague, W. H. Frere, whose account of the English church in the reigns of Elizabeth and James found the subject of parish life painful in the extreme: 'genuine religion was so uncommon as to be almost negligible. Whatever may be said of Elizabethan England in its relation to nationality, foreign affairs and literature, it must be confessed that the state of parish life was deplorable'.⁴

Although few today would endorse the views either of Frere or Kennedy, once the more overtly confessional statements are removed, their highly coloured account of parish life is not a world removed from the assumptions of more recent historians. Whether depicted by Christopher Haigh as the 'intractable and unteachable' parishioners allegedly unmoved by the ministry of pious Richard Greenham in the Cambridgeshire parish of Dry Drayton or the resistant, agnostic, heterodox sceptics drawn by Keith Thomas, conforming parishioners remain in the historiographical

wilderness where Kennedy and Frere parked them a century ago. This is not to overlook the valiant efforts of historians as different as A. L. Rowse, Patrick Collinson, Margaret Spufford and Judith Maltby in persuading us otherwise, but a powerful set of assumptions drawn from the rhetoric of Elizabethan polemicists, both Catholic and puritan, and supported by the arguments of social historians such as Keith Thomas and revisionists such as Christopher Haigh still holds sway. Despite this, there can be no doubt that over the course of Elizabeth's reign, England became both a Protestant nation and a nation of Protestants and the experience of parish conformists was at the heart of this process.

ELIZABETHAN PROTESTANTISM

Parish religion in Elizabethan England was a return to the reformed religion first enacted during the reign of Edward VI. At one level, Elizabethan Protestantism was established with the formulation, enactment and implementation of the crucial Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy, approved in late April 1559, that served as the twin pillars of the 'Elizabethan Settlement' of that same year. As already discussed, the Act of Uniformity authorised the use of the 1552 prayer book with certain revisions and was followed by the promulgation of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Faith by convocation in 1563 and given statutory authority in 1571. Royal and episcopal visitation articles and injunctions spelled out in greater detail the implications of the twin Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity and arguably had the more immediate and continuing presence in defining and shaping parish religion. The royal injunctions of 1559 were ordered to be read aloud to parishioners once each year, and, although it is rare to come across evidence that this was followed, we know that the parishioners of the London parish of Saint Botolph's Aldgate who came to morning prayer on Boxing Day, 1586, heard the minister 'reade a part of the Queen's Majesties Injunctions' as well as part of the homily concerning the nativity of Christ.⁵

It was the duty of each bishop and archdeacon to conduct regular visitations that tested the degree to which parishes conformed to the Act of Uniformity. Articles were drawn up by the ecclesiastical authorities seeking information from and about parish clergy and churchwardens concerning a variety of issues. The royal articles and injunctions of 1559, albeit addressed primarily towards the clergy, included a series of instructions for all parishioners. Three months after the visitation of 1559, each parish was ordered to provide 'a Bible of the largest volume in English' and, within a year's time, Erasmus' *Paraphrases* on the Gospels. Registers were to be kept diligently, tithes paid, a pulpit erected, the weekly services attended, all images, shrines, candlesticks and paintings to be 'utterly extinct', a poor box and parish chest maintained and all 'notorious offenders' or those who disturbed services reported to the ecclesiastical courts. Visitation articles borrowed heavily from previous sets, but there was always room for variation, reflecting the concerns of a particular diocese or bishop. Archbishop Grindal's articles of 1577 for the province of Canterbury were typical of the sorts of questions that were posed in the second decade of Elizabeth's reign. Within the course of sixty-five detailed inquiries, Grindal wanted to know whether the parish church was equipped with 'all things necessarie and requisite for common prayer, and administration of the Sacraments'. These included the Book of Common Prayer, a Psalter, the English Bible, the two

tomes of Homilies, the *Paraphrases* of Erasmus, a table of the Ten Commandments, a pulpit, a table for Holy Communion with a 'fayre linnen cloth' and 'some covering of Silke, Buckram, or other such like', a Communion cup, a surplice, a parish chest for the register book and a poor box. Grindal also asked if all altars and roof-lofts had been removed, whether the nave and chancel were in good repair and if all books 'which served for the superstitious Latine service, be utterly defaced, rent, and abolished'. He enquired after any 'that useth to praye in English, or in Latine upon Beades or other such like thing' and asked whether churchwardens and sworn men had concealed any crime or disorder. He wanted the names of those who resorted to popish priests, those who prayed using rosaries, all 'notorious evil lyvers', blasphemers, adulterers, fornicators, incestuous persons, bawds, those that used sorcery or witchcraft and all that absented themselves from the service on Sundays or holy days or that behaved in an irreverent manner in church. In theory, there were few areas of the life of the parish that escaped the probing of ecclesiastical authority, and the articles and injunctions passed down to the diocesan cathedrals and colleges bear ample testimony to the vigorous effort made on the part of the Church to implement their policy of reformation.⁶

The thrust of such evidence suggests that obedience and order were the touchstones of Elizabethan religious policy. Even if the words were not hers, Elizabeth was famously uninterested in opening 'windows into men's souls'. Obedience was all; men's consciences were not to be meddled with. Men and women were deemed to be 'well ordered in religion', or 'loyal in religion', 'conformable' or 'unconformable'. In a variety of ways, parishioners were reminded that royal authority and ecclesiastical authority were one and the same thing. Paintings of the royal arms were set up in many parish churches, prayers were offered each Sunday for the Queen, and, following the revolt of the northern earls in 1569, a new homily condemning rebellion was issued. Church attendance was from the outset deemed a mark of loyalty to the Crown.

Yet it would be wrong to see the official attitude solely in terms of obedience. There was a creative tension at work. Parishioners, defined by authority, were not only spoken of in terms of ordered obedience, in terms of their relationship with ecclesiastical lordship and the Crown. The language used in divine service, the language of the Homilies, Prayer Book and Bible spoke, at least potentially, of a quite different set of allegiances, a relationship with Almighty God. The Crown was not unaware of the radical message that could be drawn from the Scriptures, and, while it urged parishioners to read the Bible as the 'very word of God and the special food for man's soul', it took pains to warn against presumption. The Bible was to be read 'with great humility and reverence'. But the homily on the 'reading and knowledge of holy scripture' unashamedly exhorted parishioners to 'diligently search for the well of life in the books of the Old and New Testament' and to 'hear, read and know these holy rules, injunctions and statutes of our Christian religion' to 'lay up in the chest of our hearts these necessary and fruitful lessons'. This was more than reformist rhetoric preparing the intellectual ground upon which notions of order and deference were inculcated, but a central tenet of reformed Protestantism with its appeal to the authority of the Word. Yet the message was utterly mixed; social concerns mingled with spiritual lessons and how such messages were interpreted and understood by parishioners is far from clear.⁷

Elizabethan clergy played a vital part in conveying that message, and it would be hard to overestimate the central role they played in the lives of Elizabethan parishioners. They officiated at the baptism of infants, the churcing of thankful mothers, the catechising of children, the celebration of the Eucharist, the proclamation of wedding banns, the exchanging of marriage vows and services for the dead. It is important to remind ourselves of how much clerical life touched the people of the parish for there has been a tendency, seen primarily in the celebratory accounts of particular clergymen, to focus on one function alone, that of preaching, an emphasis which clearly owed much to contemporary discussion of clerical roles and was reflected in the hundreds of sermons printed in this period. Yet many ministers possessed no licence to preach, and there was much more to clerical life than sermons. There was a living to be made, and given the slender stipends that prevailed in the early modern period it comes as no surprise to find clergymen actively engaged in forms of by-employment that made the difference between abject poverty and relative wealth. Some, such as John Favour, vicar of Halifax, spent time in the practice of physic and exercising justice in the commonwealth. Others zealously worked their glebe (land attached to a benefice), collected, or perhaps sued for, their tithes, peddled their literacy, reconciled neighbours and, in a variety of ways, were brought face to face with their neighbours and parishioners, friends and enemies. The transformation of the office from that of celibate confessor presiding over the mysteries of the sacrament in Latin to that of married, bearded minister of the Word in English was one of the most striking transformations of the sixteenth century.

If part of the effect of the changes at the Reformation, the stripping away of church wealth, its subjection to the State, the introduction of the vernacular and the new theology, served to rob the clergy of its mystery, of its sacramental power, and to diminish the differences between the clergy and the laity, the new emphasis upon a preaching ministry, upon literacy, learning and godliness produced its own form of authority, seen in the contemporary reputations of celebrated preachers such as Richard Greenham or John More, the 'apostle of Norwich'. Just how these products of the universities related to the majority of their parishioners is a good question, not least when spiritual concerns overlapped with financial ones. The Elizabethan preacher Edward Dering believed that most parishes were marked by 'sutes and controversies . . . the Parson against the Vicar, the Vicar against the Parson, the Parish against both, and one against another, and al for the belly'. Those parishes with true ministers, 'by whom the parish is stirred up to all love, to God first, and then mutually one to another' were 'scarce one parish of an hundred', or 'scarce two or three in a sheere', but statements like these were part of the rhetorical repertoire of the godly preacher.⁸

In spite of the powerful position of the clergy, it is impossible to conceive of Elizabethan parish religion without the selfless or self-interested co-operation of thousands of men and women throughout the realm. From churchwardens to dogwhippers, the parish communities of Elizabethan England were utterly dependent upon the willing co-operation of thousands of middle-income householders, yeomen and husbandmen, tradesmen and artisans, who served as parish wardens, parish clerks, sidesmen, sextons and bell-ringers. Churchwardens, in particular, were vital officers in the administration of parish life. Sir Thomas Smith, in a famous passage

from *De republica anglorum*, placed churchwardens within the 'fourth sort of men which doe not rule', described them as having 'no voice nor authoritie in our common wealth', and argued that the office was not at first 'imployed upon such lowe and base persons'. This seems hard to credit, and throughout Elizabeth's reign, the office was largely filled by men of middle wealth. They were brokers, vital points of contact as representatives of their parish, gathering, selecting and presenting information under oath for and to their ecclesiastical superiors. In larger parishes, they were assisted by sworn men or sidesmen who served as their additional ears, eyes and hands. Parish clerks served a similar function to ministers, and closer attention to this neglected office would reveal much about the workaday life of Elizabethan parishes. The absence of a parish clerk was keenly felt. At the end of Elizabeth's reign, Anthony Rugg, vicar of Yetminster in Dorset, bitterly resented the lack of assistance when he took services at the nearby chapel of Chetnole. The surplice at Chetnole was 'rent and torne' and they lacked 'a sufficient bible', for the bible at Chetnole 'is of a very small printe so that in darke weather, a man that can see well, can scarcely reade in it', but it was the absence of a parish clerk that most irritated Rugg, 'by meanes whereof the minister (in seeking from house to house for the Chappell doore keye, in ringing, cheeming, tolling, bringing the bookes in place and putting on his surplesse by himself alone) is made as it were a slave to the great reproche of his callynge and slander of the gospel'.⁹

PARISH WORSHIP

In 1577, when William Harrison, vicar of the Essex parish of Radwinter, came to give an account of parish worship, the confident note struck was palpable. There was 'nothing read in our churches but the canonical Scriptures'. The Psalter was read through every thirty days, the New Testament four times a year and the Old Testament once a year. A generation or more of using the English Bible and Book of Common Prayer had done its work. He described the 'good and godly exercises' that occupied the Sabbath day and boasted that all was done 'in our vulgar tongue, that each one present may hear and understand the same'. The work of Reformation had improved clerical standards and stimulated greater literacy with the result that 'the ignorant' had learnt 'divers of the Psalms and usual prayers by heart' and 'such as can read' prayed with their minister 'so that the whole congregation at one instant pour out their petitions unto the living God for the whole estate of His church in most earnest and fervent manner'.¹⁰

Historians such as Horton Davies, Keith Thomas and Christopher Haigh beg to differ. In terms that perhaps say more about their own attendance at compulsory services, far from fervency, Elizabethan services were mind-numbingly boring occasions. Davies argued that because Elizabethan services 'were set off by so little ceremony and symbolism, church attendance must have been excessively dull'. Many were in church 'by compulsion, not by choice' and that 'the services were long and routine and . . . most churches were crowded. In such circumstances it is not surprising that many should find the worship boring, or that misbehaviour and shouting, not to mention scuffling, were frequent interruptions of the service'.¹¹ Keith Thomas argued that the tone of many Elizabethan congregations 'seems to have been that of a tiresome class of schoolboys'.¹² Even sermons, which might

have held parishioners' attention, were, according to Christopher Haigh, met with 'sheer uncomprehending boredom'.¹³ There is no need to discount the evidence that some parishioners slept through sermons or squabbled over seating. But this evidence is routinely either exaggerated or misapplied. It matters that the main reason we know of such behaviour is because snoring in sermons or fighting over seats was condemned by dominant groups of householders and accepted by the overwhelming majority of parishioners as lapses from the expected and accepted norms.

Parish services were vital occasions in the creation of Protestant England. Law, custom and zeal worked together to ensure that few households persisted in absenting themselves from weekly services. In form and structure, they were deliberately repetitive occasions. Repetition was the mainstay of much lay participation in the weekly service and lay at the heart of catechetical instruction, formal education and the more specialised practice of retaining and rehearsing the main points of sermons preached. As Patrick Collinson has argued, 'it would be foolish to deny to either the Homilies or the Book of Common Prayer the capacity to distil and drop into the mind, almost by an osmotic process, familiar forms of words which may have done more than anything else to form a Protestant consciousness'.¹⁴ The services ensured that over the course of a year a substantial portion of the Bible was read aloud and the Book of Psalms was given pride of place. The official Homilies were an amalgamation of Protestant exhortation and social instruction, but it is revealing that the authorities revised these addresses to ensure that the language used was clear and accessible. Historians have little access to osmosis, but the combined effect on the populace of the constant use of the Book of Common Prayer, Homilies, sacraments, Scripture and catechisms must have had an effect. Richmond Noble devoted a whole book to the subject of Shakespeare's familiarity with the Bible and Book of Common Prayer.¹⁵ In 1600, William Fayrecliff, a clothier of Bury Saint Edmunds, wrote in his will of his belief in the resurrection 'accordinge to the Articles of my faythe'.¹⁶ When Robert Smith, servant to the Northamptonshire gentleman and MP George Carleton, wrote his will, he began with the following invocation: 'Blessed be God in all his giftes and holy in all his workes, oure help is in the name of the Lorde whoe hath made bothe heaven and earthe, blessed be the name of the Lord from thys tyme forth and forevermore', words taken from the 'grace after supper' contained in the 1559 printed Litany used in the Queen's chapel.¹⁷ Catechising young people took place at the evening service, and, by 1593, even the acerbic Philip Stubbes was prepared to claim that Protestant children were able to discern Catholic errors:

since the word of God came abroade, and that it was lawful for every one to reade it in their mother tongue, the least child that is (almost) can spye out theyr knavery, theyr shuffling, and juggling: that both they, and their pestilent religion is out of conceipt with most men.¹⁸

Even the evidence of popular irreverence, such as the mocking words spoken by a tailor in Wisbech that demonstrated familiarity with the communion service, provides further proof of the power of osmosis.

Parish services were also crucial occasions for communication and news, and this not only in those parishes which had no licensed preacher. There was of course

a layer of essential local news in the announcing of wedding banns, the tolling of funeral knells and the performance of christenings, churchings and marriage ceremonies, but within the framework set by the Book of Common Prayer, services were actually more varied than has been realised. There is some evidence that in a number of parishes, texts such as the English translation of Erasmus's *Paraphrases* or perhaps by the 1580s, the translation of Heinrich Bullinger's *Decades*, Thomas Cooper's *Exposition of the Old Testament*, or Thomas Becon's *A New Postil* were being used in place of the *Homilies*, and many parishes were also willing purchasers of a steady stream of occasional services of prayer and thanksgiving. These told parishioners of events such as the siege and deliverance of Malta in 1565, the earthquake of 1580, the discovery of the Babington plot, the naval expeditions of 1596 and 1597 along with celebrating the Queen's Accession Day and the victory over the Spanish Armada. Official briefs informed parishioners of tragedies both personal and corporate and appealed to ideals of charity and neighbourliness. On 31 January 1591, in the London parish of Saint Botolph's Aldgate, a collection for John Bennet raised 3s. 4d., but before the members of the congregation took any coins out of their purses, they heard that Bennet was a Devonshire man and a sailor 'who had both his legges shott off in a ship withe Sir Martin Frobusher' and was awaiting surgery in the house of Thomas Hall, a local tippler.¹⁹ There were weekly collections in this parish for distressed individuals, many of them sailors, but similar appeals for aid, most especially following the catastrophe of destructive urban fires, circulated throughout England.

By 1580, the interiors of Elizabethan parish churches had been renovated in a way that emphasised the centrality of listening to sermons and participating in a vernacular service. Anything that was deemed a distraction from the centrality of the word preached was removed or minimised. Rood screens separating the nave from the chancel were dismantled, pulpits erected and a range of varied types of seating – forms, benches and pews – were set up in the nave. The walls of parish churches were whitewashed and sentences from Scripture painted on the whitened surface. Copies of the English Bible and the *Paraphrases* were chained to lecterns in the nave. Parish church interiors became lighter as plain clear glass replaced the stained glass in windows. If these changes represented a view of the interior space of reformed worship cleansed of the peril of idolatry (itself the subject of the longest of the *Homilies*) as prescribed by Elizabethan bishops, part of the success of the Elizabethan church lay with an essentially flexible accommodation of local customs, liturgical variety and lay initiatives. Bishops insisted on order, reverence and decorum in worship but it was local communities that found a solution to the problem of misbehaving dogs by paying for a dogwhipper. Parishioners were not to unquiet or grieve their ministers with noise, but allowance was given for audible engagement with sermons as well as for the sighs and groans of heartfelt prayer. One of the most remarkable and significant developments in the Elizabethan church was the incorporation of metrical psalmody, a lay and devotional practice that spread from private homes into parish churches, rather than the other way round. The practice of metrical psalm singing was perhaps the most powerful of the persuasive weapons in the armoury of English Protestantism. The royal injunctions of 1559 gave only grudging permission for congregational singing in parish worship, and the authorities did not require the purchase of books of metrical psalms as

they did the Bible, Book of Common Prayer or *Homilies*. Despite this, as both Ian Green and Hannibal Hamlin have shown, popular demand for the metrical psalter exploded in a way matched by no other text during the reign of Elizabeth, and congregational psalm singing spread like wildfire, eventually all but eliminating the choirs of men and boys singing polyphony from parish churches. The inclusion of female voices in the singing of metrical psalms must have been a crucial factor in the popularity of the psalms, a feature often commented on as novel. As early as September 1559, the diarist Henry Machyn recorded hearing the singing at 'Sant Antholyns in Budge Row, after Geneve fassyon' with the comment 'men and women all do syng and boys.'²⁰ It was not long before the authorities dropped any opposition they might have had to the practice, and many of the services of occasional prayer and thanksgiving incorporated the singing of specific psalms. When some parishes, in order to maximise participation, adopted the even more novel practice of 'lining out', that is for a parish clerk to sing each line and have the congregation repeat it, no Elizabethan bishop objected.

THE PRACTICE OF PARISH RELIGION

But how did all this work in practice? In keeping with the tenets of revisionism, historians have sought their answer in the nostalgic account written by Roger Martyn, a parishioner of Long Melford in Suffolk, lamenting the disappearance of the world he had known as a child or in the detailed recreation of the parish accounts controlled by the enigmatic priest of Morebath, Sir Christopher Trychay. The note is the same: loss and decline. But not all parishioners thought like Roger Martyn, and many Englishmen and women lived in places other than Morebath. The detailed records of income and expenditure from the bustling, raucous, suburban parish of Saint Botolph's Aldgate in London, home to perhaps more 3,000 communicants by 1580, provides another perspective on religious change. This was not a wealthy parish: the bulk of parish income came from burial fees, the hiring of various burial cloths and tolling the bells. The parish was run by a powerful vestry who kept themselves warm at their meetings with coal fires. They were the ones that ensured that the wages of the clock-keeper were paid, that oil and grease were bought for the clock and bells, that bell ropes were spliced and that benches, forms and pews were repaired. They purchased bread and wine for communion services and responded to the articles that came from the archdeacon of London. At the end of the fiscal year, they had their accounts audited. The accounts attest to the regular and unobtrusive maintenance of the fabric of the church. This is not the stuff of stories to make the pulse race, and it is easy for the historian to turn aside, convinced that Elizabethan conformity is not a story worth telling. Forty years earlier, the situation was quite different. Turning to the accounts that begin in 1547 is to confront a tale of stark division between a group of evangelicals and conservatives vying for control of the parish church and services. It is rare to witness such conflict on the pages of parish accounts, but the contest can be tracked in folio after folio. To give but a flavour: the accounts record (and one would want to know more about the scribe recording such matters) that on 17 July 1547 the parish purchased six books of the Psalms in English 'to have the service of the Church there upon them sung, to the end that the people should understand to

praise God better. William Rofford, curate, resisted and would not sing or say.' Rofford, the curate, was eventually dismissed but not before the conflict went before the Lord Mayor of London and Protector Somerset. With the evangelicals in control, the scribe writing these accounts would refer positively to the 'faithful' of the parish and dismissively to a chantry priest as a 'dead soule prest'. When the parish sold 'four old Latin service books', they were further described as books 'which the people did not understand'.²¹ The addition of this unusual layer of editorial comment allows us to explore something of the motivations behind the actions of both evangelicals and conservatives in the course of the Reformation commencing in the reign of Edward VI, the return to Catholic ways under Mary I and the restoration of Protestantism under Elizabeth. The drama of the earlier accounts, however, serves to reinforce the prejudice that the settled years of Elizabeth's reign reveal only dutiful obedience.

What makes the choice of Saint Botolph's Aldgate particularly compelling is the survival of a set of memoranda books kept by the parish clerk in the 1580s and 1590s. These volumes are the closest we have to what might be termed a parish diary kept by a remarkable parish clerk, Thomas Harridance, who was scrupulous in his recording of parish events. Every sermon preached, every homily read, every communion service with numbers of communicants and the amounts of bread and wine, every public penance performed, every notice proclaimed – all these, and much more besides, were written down, creating a layer of 'thick description' for close to twenty years, against which the formal parish accounts can be laid and which together open up the character of Elizabethan Protestantism. The amount of recorded detail is formidable. For the single month of January 1591 (chosen at random), there are 117 separate entries providing the details of seventeen christenings, nineteen churchings, fourteen weddings, thirteen burials and wedding banns being announced thirty-seven times. Not a single day passed without some incident or activity involving the parish church. Given London's mortality rates, this was a parish in which the rituals of life and death were tightly interwoven. On the same day, 1 January 1591, George Rowland, a cook dwelling in Ball Alley in the liberty of East Smithfield, brought a living son and dead daughter to the parish church; his infant son Garth was christened and the body of his two-year-old daughter Katherine was buried. In 1583, the chief parishioners organised a voluntary subscription to employ a preacher, and from that date the parishioners had sermons both morning and evening on Sundays and lectures on Thursdays. If this smacked of puritanism, it was a puritanism that embraced the services prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer. Churchings were routinely performed as were private communions. On 7 March 1587, Robert Heaz, the minister of the parish with two churchwardens and two sidesmen went to the house of Mr Alexander Harding in order to speak with Mrs Harding 'concerning her absence from the church'. They discovered that gout had prevented her from attending parish services but 'as concerning religion, she said she trusted to be saved only by the death and merits of Jesus and by no other means' and that she hoped to take part in a communion service very soon.²² A later entry records that the sacrament was brought to her home. Suspicious solicitude for the spiritual comfort of a gouty parishioner went hand in hand with the triumphant pealing of bells four weeks earlier, on 9 February, 'and was for Joye that the Queene of Skottes that Ennemye to ower most noble

Queenes Majestie and ower cuntrye was beheaded. For the which the Lorde God be prayed and I wold to God that all her confederates weare knowne and cutt of By the lyke meanes.'²³ When the English fleet went out in August 1596, 'a prayer of thankesgiving & for continewance of good successe to hir Majesties forces was read in the parish church' and 'at nyght there weare Bonefyers made Thoroghout all the Cittie'.²⁴ This was a deeply hierarchical and patriarchal community that provided some modest relief to the poor. There were weekly collections each Sunday for those with grim tales of suffering. The poor box in the church was opened regularly, as on 6 January 1591, by Mr Heaz and two churchwardens. They found 20s. 6d., 'which money was by them incontiently distributed to the poore of this parishe where as most neede requyred', and parishioners too poor to pay the fees for weddings, churchings or burials were not charged. These entries disclose the central features of Elizabethan parish religion in action, stimulated by preaching, aggressively Protestant, profoundly patriarchal and all scrupulously recorded. For Thomas Harridance, the parish clerk, his work, as he said on more than one occasion, was 'I trust to god his glorie & all our comforts'.²⁵

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