

### **Fifth Warwick Symposium on Parish Research**

**Veranstalter:** Beat Kümin; Steve Hindle; Peter Marshall; Penny Roberts on behalf of the 'Warwick Network for Parish Research'

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Parishes play a prominent part in recent studies on late medieval and early modern culture, and current debates on religious change, political life and cultural identities in local communities demonstrate the wide range of approaches to the subject. The Fifth Warwick Symposium on Parish Research, sponsored by the University's Humanities Research Centre, was held on Saturday 19th May 2007 under the general theme of 'Challenges to the Parish'. There was a strongly international flavour to the papers this year, which ranged in focus from the Dutch Netherlands, to England, and to North America. Numbers at the symposium are limited to enhance discussion and preserve an informal seminar atmosphere, and this year there were approximately thirty delegates in attendance, ranging from established scholars to postgraduate research students. The day began with a welcome from Beat Kümin, after which delegates were invited to introduce themselves and their parish-related research interests.

The first paper by Dr. Robert Lutton (Nottingham) was 'Parochial religion, heterodoxy and Nonconformity in two Wealden parishes, c.1450-1640'. Its focus lay on 'pieties in transition' in the two English parishes of Cranbrook and Tenterden, situated in the county of Kent. Kent forms an interesting context for parochial case studies because of its strong connections to Lollardy in the late medieval period, and the subsequent speed with which evangelical ideas were adopted during the Reformation. The basis of Dr. Lutton's comparison was statistical information gathered from records of religious giving in wills and churchwardens' accounts. He used this data to draw comparisons between the pre- and post-reformation pieties expressed by the two communities, and also to chart trends of pious giving between different kin-

ship groups (identified by surname) within each town. The conclusion was that local circumstances created distinctive religious cultures in both Cranbrook and Tenterden, the former characterised by higher levels of investment in the liturgy and its attendant ceremonial, the latter with more moderate support for such 'traditional' devotions, and that these in turn mediated the two parishes' experiences of pre- and post-reformation religion. He contended that it is not enough to say that the degree of local 'investment' in late medieval Catholicism determined later responses to reform: rather, the historian should also consider the wider parochial context as shaped by regional and socio-economic particularities.

Discussion following the paper touched on a variety of aspects. There was debate over whether this was a demonstration of either the Weber or the Tawney thesis at a micro level. Dr. Lutton asserted that he was interested in the relationship between the beginnings of capitalism and Protestantism, but more specifically in the cultural processes involved: what this meant in terms of peoples' piety. The discussion moved on to parallels with post-reformation Catholic survivalism, and the importance of yeoman farmers in sustaining 'nonconformity' of any flavour. The possibility was raised of whether it would be practical or possible to extend the category of 'family' to take into account marriage connections. It was also mentioned that money spent on funerals was not necessarily motivated exclusively by concern for peoples' souls, and there was agreement that the issue of commemoration was just as much a factor. Some concern was expressed over the link drawn in the paper between the popularity of the Jesus mass in pre-reformation Tenterden, and the tendency of the town towards a 'moderate Christocentric reformism'. The speaker acknowledged this, and expressed the need for a national study of the Jesus mass. Dr. Lutton also declared that he was confident about the careful use of wills as his primary source of evidence for popular piety.

The second paper of the day was 'Parish churches and the Catholic Imagination in the Dutch Republic', delivered by Dr. Judith Pollmann (Leiden) and chaired by Penny Roberts. The paper was concerned with the enduring

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hold that the physical space of the parish church had on the minds of Catholics living in the Protestant Dutch Republic. Through a variety of visual and textual sources she was able to show that their former places of worship remained an emotive issue for dispossessed Dutch Catholics despite subsequent 'desecration' by Protestants. In the tolerant atmosphere of the Dutch Republic Catholics were free to worship together: secular priests and private house churches were permitted allowing for a regular ritual life. However, Catholics could not completely disassociate themselves from appropriated Protestant religious spaces. It was imperative that baptism and burial still took place in church, and these incursions into sacred space represented moments of temporary reclamation, whilst also serving as a reminder of what they had lost. Church space continued to exert a strong pull on the Catholic imagination, but the Protestant authorities were determined to limit Catholic access, resulting in a stable but uneasy coexistence.

Following the paper discussion topics included whether Dutch Catholics ever expressed the opinion that church space was 'their' space, regardless of the fact that it was now in use mainly by Protestant congregations. Whilst recognising that this was the implication of Catholic behaviour, Pollmann had not come across an explicit example of this. There was debate about the enduring power of sacred space, in the face of Protestant 'pollution', prompting the speaker to elaborate on Catholic belief in the persisting sacrality of holy sites, citing the continuing attraction of dismantled shrines to pilgrims seeking access to the supernatural. Peter Brown's notion of the 'portability of piety' was raised in relation to private churches which retained the name of the patron of the original church building, with the implication that actual space may have been less important than imagined space. It was agreed that this was a useful concept, but Dr. Pollman re-emphasised the fact that actual space was just as important as imagined space, vis-à-vis the Catholics' desire to return to their actual former churches. The point was made that the fact that there was no legal category of recusancy in the Dutch Republic meant that it was possible for Catho-

lics to foster a more ambiguous attitude to the buildings of the established church, because they were not forced into a covert and transgressive religious practice.

The third paper was delivered by Dr. Jeremy Gregory (Manchester), and was entitled 'The porous parish, the Church of England and nonconformity: leakage and seepage in late seventeenth and eighteenth century England and New England'. Peter Marshall chaired the session. Dr. Gregory began his discussion with a reminder that the English parish has never been an orderly and fixed unit. He contended that the parish was a leaky institution with respect to external boundaries with other parishes and internal 'boundaries' between dissenting groups. He identified nonconformity as the biggest potential challenge to the parish unit following the Restoration and subsequent Act of Toleration. By the 1790s, ten per cent of people were categorised as 'nonconformist', however it was argued that this term obscures the fluidity of earlier religious preferences. In reality, nonconformists might possess a dual or triple allegiance, attending both the parish church and several alternative religious gatherings: even the clergy themselves might refer to their 'nonconformist parishioners'. In New England, where there was no parish system, it was the Anglican Church that was forced to adopt 'nonconformist' attributes in order to survive. In summation, the speaker asserted that the porosity of the parish was a sign of strength rather than weakness: people could seep into as well as out of parochial structures, which helps explain the longevity of the parish as a unit.

In the discussion afterwards, Dr. Gregory acknowledged that geographical factors had a role to play in determining the cohesion of the parish. For example, the remoteness of some individuals from the church building in the larger parishes of Northern England provided greater opportunity for leakage and seepage, with chapels and nonconformist groupings evolving out of necessity in scattered settlements. It was also pointed out that there appears to have been an element of 'experimentation' by the laity, and what amounted to a syncretic approach to the construction of an individually tailored piety. The is-

sue of communion also arose as one of the defining aspects of parochial membership, however it was noted that the church had always struggled to enforce attendance at communion for a variety of different reasons. The speaker was also asked about the chronology of the porous parish, which he contended persists to the present day. Finally, the contrast was drawn between the permeability of the parish as a religious entity, and the impermeability of the civic institution, for example with regard to poor law jurisdiction.

Commenting on the papers, Professor Miri Rubin (Queen Mary) began by saying that it was rare to attend a conference where all of the papers delivered were of such outstanding quality, demonstrating a tremendous breadth whilst engaging in a common dialogue. She posed the question of 'what is a parish'? Historians have tended to treat them as a uniform entity, as a idealised Christian community providing pastoral care from cradle to grave, however Rubin asserted that over 100,000 parishes across Europe could not possibly all have operated in the same way, and that despite uniformity in clerical dress and doctrine, the laity's experience would have varied massively over time and place. She went on to outline some of the possible underlying influences that might have contributed to the sort of parochial diversity encountered throughout the day. Firstly, the desire to be different from one's neighbours. Secondly, the influence might come from a single committed individual who by virtue of charisma or influence might implant a new religious idea or practice. Thirdly, there may be something connected to the fabric of the parish such as a miraculous event which provided a focal point for the creation of a distinctive communal identity. Kinship and affinity might underpin all of the above. The importance of the notion of the 'parish in exile' from its sacred space was emphasised, and parallels drawn with the Jews' historical loss of the Temple in Jerusalem, and the literature and language of learning associated with it. It was questioned whether the absence of clergy might provide the opportunity for a new type of religious leadership to emerge. In conclusion there was a reminder of the political significance of the parish, and its additional function as a power-

ful tool of the state.

The general discussion, moderated by Beat Kümin, started with the following questions: What is the parish? What are the influences shaping it? Is it moveable? Is it part of a global story? This opened the way for a lively discussion on the nature of the parish and its responses to the various challenges it faced. The ensuing debate included reflection on whether voluntarism was incompatible with the parish; the ability of the parish to cope with religious pluralism; the territorially static nature of the parish in the face of a continually changing population; the possibility that tithes might be used to define the geographical boundaries of the parish; the ability of different groups to control or participate in the system; the absence of a parochial structure in some parts of Europe (such as the Reformed Netherlands); and the fact that very few parishes had the ability to choose their own clergy. The consensus appeared to be that the parish was a varied, dynamic, flexible and coherent entity, resilient in the face of diverse challenges, but that a general definition remained elusive. Despite its significance to the historian as a unit of analysis, perhaps for many people the parish was simply 'the place where you have to worship with people that you don't necessarily want to be with'.

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