

Reflecting the parish - Fourteenth Warwick Symposium on Parish Research

Veranstalter: Beat Kümin, Department of History, University of Warwick; Ellen K. Rentz, Department of Literature, Claremont McKenna College; Warwick Network for Parish Research Humanities Research Centre, University of Warwick

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Last year's symposium focused on a very local subject – the parish in Warwickshire; in contrast this year's was truly international in dimension. We welcomed speakers from Germany, the United States and the UK, representing a range of academic disciplines including history, archaeology, history of art and literature studies. Twenty six people attended the day, many of whom were 'repeat visitors' renewing old contacts; many had links to university departments but it was pleasing to see independent scholars present as well.

In his introductory remarks, BEAT KÜMIN (University of Warwick) outlined the purpose of the meeting. Following a series of symposia dedicated to specific records or themes, this was an attempt to stand back and reflect on the role and significance of parishes more generally. He also took the opportunity to highlight new features of the *My-Parish Website*¹, encouraging all those with related interests to become members and to post information on sources, research findings or upcoming events.

Symposium co-organizer ELLEN K. RENTZ (Claremont McKenna College, USA), author of „Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England“ (2015), then delivered the keynote address on 'In the Nave with Chaucer'. Her subject was Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: more particularly the light that four of its constituents, *The Squire's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's*, *the Parson's* and *the Miller's Tales* shed not just on fourteenth-century parish life and the interface between the temporal and the spiritual, but on poetic form. In particular, she considered how Chaucer uses parish references in order to raise questions about genre, form, and reading practices.

In the *Squire's Tale*, for example (whose main plot links to Genghis Khan's daughter meeting with a grieving falcon), Chaucer makes a surprising reference to a cadaver tomb, a moment that ultimately raises questions about poetic form as much as it does about the physical structure of the church. Throughout the talk, Rentz argued that, although Chaucer's references to the parish have the potential to illuminate aspects of late medieval religious culture, they must also be read in their broader literary context. „If we read references to the parish in isolation from the rest of the poem,“ she suggested, „then we're not really reading the poem.“ But from these four tales the five-times married Wife of Bath emerges as the most feisty (and perhaps most likable) character as she is portrayed elbowing her way up the nave (no pews in the way then) to be closest to the altar – not perhaps initially apparent as behaviour to be expected of a pilgrim. But her sociability is in contrast to that of the Parson whose tale was circulated separately and anonymously. This tale takes place outside the nave as the Parson travels – on the road around the parish or away from the parish on pilgrimage. In the ensuing discussion a parallel was drawn with eighteenth-century clergy attempting to serve huge northern parishes and failing to know their parishioners. In contrast to the imperfections in lay worship the Parson 'lives by the book' – perhaps unusual for parish priests of the time – but requires more charity. Is fellowship (as practised by the Wife of Bath) more important than charity and of greater use to the community? Discussion was extensive and the paper showed how a critical reading of literature (including more sustained attention to poetic form) allows parish scholars to gain new insights into the physical and spiritual structure of the late medieval church.

The first thematic session, chaired by Maureen Harris (University of Leicester) comprised three presentations on the theme of 'Parish and Family'. CHRIS LANGLEY (Newman University, Birmingham) spoke on "Out of a Christian dewtie": Child care and parish networks in seventeenth-century Scotland'. He discussed types of pastoral behaviour ba-

¹ <http://my-parish.org> (28.07.2016).

sed on session and presbytery records. In particular he was interested in the under-studied part played by the laity. He drew on a number of cases in which the parish became involved in disputes about the maintenance of illegitimate children and especially the provision of wet-nurses for these children. His initial illustration demonstrated how lay pressure could alter the decision of the parish – in this case taking over the provision of a wet nurse for a child ‘left’ with a woman member of the congregation. Citing other examples he demonstrated how parish authorities tried not to be too heavy handed but rather encouraged the parents to remain on speaking terms and avoid disputes. The parishioners, he argued, could force changes in official policy.

In her paper on ‘The Manor and the Parish: Local Organisation in the Sixteenth Century through the Example of the Blount Family’, ELIZABETH NORTON (King’s College, London) discussed the changing relationship of parish / village and manor in local life. The focus of her research was the Blount family, various branches of which settled in Shropshire, Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Oxfordshire. Referring to manorial records she argued against the generalisation that at this time the parish was becoming more important than the manor as feudalism declined. She demonstrated the complex ways in which parish and manor boundaries overlapped and how those members of the intermediate levels of society might cross borders too and be involved with more than one parish or manor. The manorial court, she argued, was the foundation for the centralisation of justice. The persistent recusancy of the Blounts provided an interesting backdrop as most of the family avoided presentation for their religious views – one even when Governor of the Tower of London was, during a plague epidemic, allowed to take Catholic prisoners to his own Oxfordshire estate, where Catholic priests were in residence.

ANNE THOMPSON (University of Warwick) then examined the new phenomenon of clergy wives in sixteenth-century England. For them there was no handbook setting out duties and their emergence has not been well-studied. The First Epistle to Timothy provided a model for these women to emulate in sup-

porting their husbands in their work and to provide an example in the parish. Illustrations of contemporary memorials extolling the virtues of some of these pioneer women demonstrated the respect in which they were held. An injunction in 1559 separated clerical marriage from ordinary marriage. Two Justices of the Peace had to provide a certificate testifying to the woman’s suitability as a clergy wife and that she demonstrated good behaviour and godliness. Some of these women were given responsibilities by their husbands to distribute charities after the clergyman’s death.

After the break for lunch and networking, the afternoon session, chaired by Elizabeth Tingle (De Montfort University, Leicester) focused on ‘Parish, Place and Identity’. Once again a multi-disciplinary approach was apparent. The first speaker was a literature researcher, SUNYOUNG LEE (Arizona State University, USA) who took as her title, ‘„nōþing ells but kepe right mesure“: Cultivating Moderation in Eating and Drinking for the Community in the Book of Vices and Virtues’. In this talk she investigated the fourteenth-century *Book of Vices and Virtues* – a translation of the French work, *Somme le Roi*. She considered in particular the section on gluttony. We were surprised to hear that excessive time spent preparing food and drink could be one of the five manifestations of gluttony as it stopped people using the time for more appropriate spiritual matters. More generally, however, she argued that the division between moderation and gluttony was not absolute and that the text promoted a sense of community rather than condemning people.

EVA MARIE LEHNER (Universität Duisburg-Essen, Germany) spoke on ‘Parish registers and religious communities in south Germany’. Such registers, listing baptisms, marriages and burials were introduced in the Age of the Reformation and have been mainly used for demographic studies. Lehner, in contrast, concentrated on the narrative contained in the registers of two south German Protestant parishes – in Nuremberg and Sulzbach – and the light these entries shone on the relationships of the parish with religious outsiders. The obvious example of this was the relationship with Catholics, which she illustrated with the account of the

problems caused by the illness and death of a travelling Catholic woman in one of the parishes. It was unclear if the woman had indeed converted to Protestantism but the register entry noted, 'we hope for her salvation and allow her funeral to be in our own churchyard.' This attitude was in line with the spirit of compromise within parishes which earlier speakers had already highlighted. She also showed how Protestants were still troubled by what would happen to the souls of infants who died before baptism in the church – was their salvation in danger? Some clearly underwent emergency baptism by midwives. Study of the registers also revealed the use of symbols to record information such as death by hanging or other forms of execution. Discussion afterwards focused on how representative these two parishes were and how the extent of detail varied with the writer.

The final research paper of the day was presented by JÖRG WIDMAIER (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, Germany) on 'The Gotlandic Parish. Concepts of identity and social differentiation'. Gotland is the largest Swedish island in the Baltic Sea and served as an important trading post in the pre-modern period. Its great wealth was reflected in the sizeable churches built by the 95 rural parishes. As an archaeologist, Widmaier combined the use of written sources with an analysis of material remains in order to study concepts of identity and social differentiation. Of note was the comparatively large size of the chancel in contrast to the nave as well as evidence of the merchant elite (there were no nobles) having their own chancel door. One plan showed a number of entrances to a chancel together with galleries only accessible by steps which suggested a different relationship between the clergy and laity to that seen in parishes elsewhere. This gave rise to much discussion. Because of the extensive trading links, the churches display influences of both Western / Eastern Christianity as well as Islam. Even after the Reformation they remained very Catholic in appearance, with side altars and sculptures remaining in place. The *Guta Lag*, the thirteenth-century law of the Gotlanders, laid down requirements on the parishioners so, for example, if the tithes

were not paid, the church would be closed. Thus in this economically very successful region, it appears that the parish was the focus of the community.

ANDREW FOSTER (University of Kent) closed the formal proceedings with a project presentation entitled 'Parish registers in the Interregnum', a period which brought much disruption to local ecclesiastical life and its records. Questions arising include: are there patterns of survivals between dioceses; do other documents (e.g. glebe terriers) survive from this period; how smooth and fast was the recovery of record keeping post 1660 when most dioceses had new bishops and archdeacons; what was the effect of the new Congregational / Presbyterian associations? One possibly incorrect conclusion derived from deficient records is that the population of Sussex dropped by twenty per cent over the course of the interregnum. The proposal is to survey the church records surviving from this period which may consist of a range of documents to be found in a variety of archives.

Following a general discussion on the origins, transformations and the long-term trajectories of European parishes, Beat Kümin concluded the meeting by thanking all participants and Warwick's Humanities Research Centre for its continued support of the Symposium. A future theme is likely to be 'Parishes and Migration'.

Conference Overview:

Introduction:

Beat Kümin (University of Warwick)

Keynote Address – 'In the Nave with Chaucer':

Ellen K. Rentz (Claremont McKenna College)

Session 1: 'Parish and Family'

Chair: Maureen Harris (University of Leicester)

Chris Langley (Newman University, Birmingham): 'Out of a Christian dewtie': Child care and parish networks in seventeenth-century Scotland'

Elizabeth Norton (King's College, London): 'The Manor and the Parish: Local Organisation in the Sixteenth Century through the Example of the Blount Family'

Anne Thompson (University of Warwick):
'Perceptions and Expectations of the Elizabethan Clergy Wife: Evidence from within the Parish'

Session 2: 'Parish, Place and Identity'

Chair – Elizabeth Tingle (De Montfort University)

Sunyoung Lee (Arizona State University):
'„noping ells but kepe right mesure“: Cultivating Moderation in Eating and Drinking for the Community in the Book of Vices and Virtues'

Eva Marie Lehner (Universität Duisburg-Essen): 'Parish registers and religious communities in south Germany'

Jörg Widmaier (Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen): 'The Gotlandic Parish. Concepts of identity and social differentiation'

Project Presentation

Andrew Foster (University of Kent): 'Parish registers in the Interregnum'

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