



Robert Whiting. *The Reformation of the English Parish Church.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Illustrations. 318 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76286-1.

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Stripping the Parish Church

Robert Whiting's *The Reformation of the English Parish Church* is in some respects a lavishly illustrated follow-up to his 1998 book *Local Responses to the English Reformation*. Focused on the material impact of the Reformation on England's parish churches, Whiting organizes the first part of his book around the physical requirement of the pre-Reformation liturgy, starting with the rood screen, which divided the chancel and nave, the incumbent and the parishioners' respective responsibilities. Following a discussion of what happens to the rood screen and gallery, he moves on to other aspects of the church, particularly altars, fonts, plate, cloth, books, and receptacles. In the second part, Whiting looks at what he terms "Additional Components," which include paintings, glass, images, organs and bells, pulpits and seats, galleries, and finally memorials. Each of these physical aspects of the English parish church experienced some change as a result of the Reformation.

His sources for this newest study are not only the churchwardens' accounts that historians have come to rely on as a major source of information on the parish, but also wills, episcopal records, and the occasional royal or chronicle descriptions of religious practice. Whiting has also spent a great deal of time with specialized studies of individual parish features, such as the extensive literature on rood screens. In conjunction with these familiar written sources, Whiting uses the surviving parish churches themselves. With his greatest familiarity being in the West Country, particularly Devon, he draws most of his evidence from this region, chronicling the changes that took place in parish churches, as parishioners dismantled rood screens; defaced or decapitated images; and hid away books, relics, and vestments. His numerous black-and-white and color photos help illustrate these changes. His images of the changing nature of family memorials are particularly effective. As he traces these physical alterations, Whiting lays out the basic theology

that brought them about, making distinctions between moderate, traditional, and nontraditional parishes. The survival of many hallmarks of pre-Reformation liturgical practice, Whiting argues, is due to their continued practical function in the Protestant liturgy, such as galleries and seats, or the lack of an explicit ban, which allowed traditional parishes to hold onto their screens.

By focusing on the material culture of the Reformation, Whiting introduces us to a number of artisans who were responsible for constructing or demolishing the rood screens, bench ends, and other artifacts desired for the pre-Reformation liturgy. Whiting ascribes religious motivations to their work, a problematic assumption given the economy within which these artisans worked. What he misses are the local "nonprofessional" artisans and laborers who also worked for their parish, washing the vestments, fixing the masonry, and altering the clothing donated to become vestments. The work of these men and women, whose names appear in the records, provides a more assured connection between labor and religious belief.

Whiting's beliefs about the pace and source of the Reformation have not changed in producing this work. He argued in his book *Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (1989), and maintains in his current effort, that medieval people generally welcomed the Reformation, having already shown a growing disinterest in the trappings and forms of religious practice by the 1520s. Here, Whiting adds to his conclusions, explaining the rapid conformity of parishes to the Crown's mandates and requirements: "Duty, conformity, obedience: these mental attitudes appear to have been at least as powerful as spiritual convictions or material interests in inducing men and women to accept the reformation of their parish churches" (p. 237). In light of the recent works on the late medieval parish and late medieval spirituality, particularly women's spirituality,

this is an unconvincing argument in its baldest form, but as few of these recent works appear in his bibliography, they are not part of his thinking on the subject. While his strong assertion is sometimes modified with recognition of regional variations, regional variation is not a prominent theme in his book nor is there a systematic mapping of parishes that immediately changed their physical surroundings or dragged their heels over conformity to the new dictates of the Crown. And indeed, he frequently finds his evidence in conflict with his assumptions. He declares that “some evidence particularly from the south east suggests also a decline in reverence for the host,” yet he repeatedly describes the continuing acquisition of plate, vestments, and altar cloths right up into the 1530s (p. 25). All would have enhanced the Mass and would, to my mind, show reverence for the host. These donations also show individual wealth and status, which Whiting

tends to separate out as unconnected “secular” motivations rather than an aspect of pre-Reformation devotion that connected individual identity and piety.

Whiting’s book taps into the continued appeal of parish churches that many Web sites, such as <http://www.suffolkchurches.co.uk> and <http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/>, also express. Whiting’s book shows the continued debate among historians that surrounds the pace and implementation of the Reformation. While Whiting does not deny the role of the Crown in ushering in England’s Reformation, his England is one where the citizenry is generally welcoming of change, rather than stubbornly resistant as perhaps best argued by Eamon Duffy’s numerous publications (most obviously *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-c. 1580* [1992]).

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