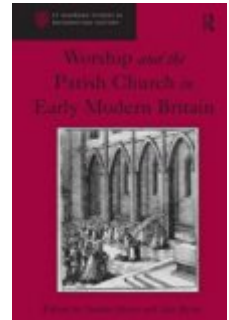


Natalie Mears, Alec Ryrie, eds.. *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. vi + 250 pp. \$124.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4094-2604-2.



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In recent years the British Reformations have been studied from all sorts of innovative and novel angles, with studies appearing of themes as diverse as interior design, the physical landscape, and the senses. This may even amount to something of a “cultural turn” in what has sometimes appeared to be a rather traditional subject area. So it is perhaps surprising that we still understand so little about regular worship, one of the central experiences of lived religion in the post-Reformation British Isles, and about the site of that experience: the parish church. Much more energy has been expended reconstructing the experiences of those at either end of the religious spectrum—Puritans or radical separatists, and recusants or church papists—than those of the majority somewhere in the middle. This collection of essays, a companion to Martin and Ryrie’s *Private and Domestic Devotion in Early Modern Britain* (2013), is a very welcome attempt to fill in some of this gap.

There is, of course, good reason why this subject remains a difficult one: the everyday and the

commonplace leave less evidence behind than the radical or marginal, and as the editors point out, it is very difficult to move beyond our plentiful evidence of what was supposed to happen in church every week, to understanding what that meant to those present (p. 2). There are also features which can distract the attention, such as the sermon, which dominated contemporary Protestant reflections on worship, as well as much conventional Reformation historiography. This volume therefore attempts to reconstruct elements of the service such as music, liturgy, and prayer, in order to develop a more rounded and experiential picture of what happened in parish churches each week. This is not to say that it adopts a purely “from the pew” perspective: the editors insist that prescriptive statements and theories and what happened on the ground cannot be studied in isolation from each other, and in fact the majority of the chapters are probably more directly concerned with discourses and debates surrounding parish worship than with individual examples. This presumably reflects disparities in evidence as well: as

Hannah Cleugh notes, what the parishioners took home from their experience of worship remains “mysterious” (p. 30).

The opening chapters point towards greater complexity and ambiguity in the relationship between the Book of Common Prayer and the public’s experience of worship. Hannah Cleugh uncovers intriguing ambiguities and tensions in the theological lessons which Common Prayer liturgy provided to congregations on important topics such as baptism and burial. It was not just a case of the familiar mismatch between official theology and popular belief, but a divergence within the prescribed texts themselves, and one which must have left considerable room for personal interpretation in the pew. The next two chapters consider liturgical forms which have often been neglected in favor of the Prayer Book: special public liturgies and prayers in Natalie Mears’s chapter, and the Elizabethan Primers in Bryan Spinks’s. During natural or political disasters, or other relatively frequent occasions calling for specific and tailored public worship, fasting, and prayer, English and Welsh parishioners would experience extended periods when worship was based on specially printed and circulated liturgies. The experience of public worship appears to have been more diverse, and less fixed, than the central, even monolithic status of the Prayer Book might superficially suggest. The final chapter in the volume, by Judith Maltby, returns to the Prayer Book, and how its proscription and replacement in the 1640s actually provided an opportunity for further creative experimentation and development of its liturgical form, contributing significantly to a very different text being re-established after the Restoration.

Further tensions in post-Reformation worship are identified in Alec Ryrie’s chapter on fasting in England and Scotland: this practice survived the early Reformation’s attacks and was reconfigured as the practice of humiliation and self-reflection to stir up repentance (rather than as a mechanism for achieving goals in itself). But this transition

was not easily maintained, and while fasting was useful psychologically, and—since it involved an absence of activity—was an acceptably unritualistic type of ritual, there was great potential for understandings of it to lapse into the sense that it was efficacious.

The next three chapters all concern music, in some form or other, expanding on the increasingly clear historiographical consensus that music was far from silenced by the Reformation. Peter McCullough takes this beyond the familiar area of psalm-singing to argue that Jacobean advocates of choral or organ music should not be taken as proto-Laudians, and instead that there was some conciliation between pulpit and choir. His chapter suggests a need to avoid adopting the narratives of those contemporaries who saw the two as contradictory. This is complemented by Jonathan Willis’s examination of discourses concerning music, which shows that music was more than just a sop to the conservatives; if there were tensions between the spiritual risks and the spiritual advantages of music they were not a product of the Reformation, but inherent within Christianity itself.

Christopher Marsh’s chapter—along with Trevor Cooper’s detailed reconstruction of the parish church at Little Gidding and the Ferrar family’s approach to worship and decoration—takes us most convincingly into the space of the parish church itself, through his examination of the rather different musical genre of bell-ringing. The new and more complex practice of change-ringing was particularly attractive to many parishes’ young men, but Marsh argues that although it may have annoyed neighbors and clergy, such activity was not simply youthful rebellion, but a new outlet for religious and social instincts which were poorly catered for after the Reformation, in the absence of guilds and church ales. There is a similar emphasis on physicality in John Craig’s chapter on prayer and the body, which considers debates over the mechanics of

prayer: eyes open, or closed? Hats off, or hats on? These things mattered just as much as the content or wording of prayer, and here Craig, as do the other contributors, points to new areas which will have to be addressed to develop a fuller understanding of early modern worship.

It is, perhaps, rather predictable, and probably tiresome, that a Scottish historian reviewing a book on “Early Modern Britain” will comment on the extent to which the wider geographical label applies. It is very clear from the editors’ introduction that the book emerges from primarily English historiographical impulses, and Rylie’s chapter on fasting is the only one to adopt a genuinely cross-border approach. To be fair, this probably also reflects a lack of research on regular public worship in Scotland, or perhaps even a sense that Margo Todd’s *Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (2002) has taken us, in some ways, further into the lived experience of worship in Scotland than has yet been possible in England, thanks not least to the remarkably rich evidence of kirk session minutes. Either way, while we learn relatively little about Scottish Reformed worship in this volume, Scottish historians should find rich comparative material, and—it is to be hoped—the stimulus to ask new questions.

The above summary can hardly do justice to the chapters, but it should be emphasized that this volume does not offer a single approach, and there is certainly no party line, or simplistic conclusion to be drawn. Each chapter works on a specific corner of the picture, and although there is a great deal still to be done, the book succeeds admirably in opening up its subject matter and advancing our knowledge of key tensions in liturgy, music, and in the space of the early modern church itself.

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