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978-0-521-57037-4- Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century

W. M. Jacob

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The aim of this book is to explore the place of Christianity in the lives of lay adherents of the Church of England during the period between the Revolution Settlement of 1688/9 and the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Evangelical and Methodist revivals began to offer new challenges to the established Church.

Investigation of social and economic life in the first half of the eighteenth century shows that it is both part of the 'world we have lost', to borrow a phrase from Peter Laslett,¹ and a transitional phase containing the seeds of a new world. The social and economic life of the early eighteenth century was relatively small-scale. Most people lived in villages and small towns. Large towns were exceptional: London was unique, the largest city in Europe. The other great cities, Bristol, Norwich, York and Newcastle, were small by modern standards. In relatively small-scale societies people knew one another, or at least knew about one another. There was potential for a much greater sense of social solidarity and cohesion than is possible in larger communities. It was not, however, a static society. People were mobile. Referring to the mid and late seventeenth century, Richard Gough noted nineteen families in Myddle in Shropshire who had at least one son or daughter who had lived in London and some families who had several members who had settled there.² Travel, especially by water, was not difficult, and the network of small-boat travel by coast and river was extensive.

Most importantly, much economic activity was at the domestic level. There were a few large-scale industrial enterprises, but these were exceptional. Most people worked in the context of a household or a family, their own or someone else's. Labour relations were close

¹ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1965).

² David G. Hey, *The English Rural Community: Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts* (Leicester, 1974), p. 192.

and direct. At most levels of economic activity husbands and wives worked together, and children, servants and workers were drawn into the family unit for purposes of production, training and education, and support and maintenance. Again, the family or household was a flexible unit: servants, apprentices, sons and daughters came and went. It was not a static society – people rose and fell on the economic and social scale – but it was a relatively stable one.

Social identity was not so much by class as by household, which included a wide range of people of different sorts – the master and mistress, daughters and sons, and servants at a variety of levels. The age of marriage for both men and women was relatively late – the mid-twenties – and unmarried children lived with their parents, or, if they were apprentices or employees, with their masters and mistresses. There was thus constant interaction across social boundaries. People of different ‘sorts’ lived physically close together, either in the same house, or nearby. There were few socially segregated suburbs. People did not travel to work. This created a world in which mutual interdependence was expected and natural.

The foci of life were the family or household and the community. Most activities were communal, involving people of different sorts participating together. Fairs, which were the great trading points of the early modern era, attracted people of every level of society. The gentry and aristocracy attended them to stock up for the year, as well as people of ‘the middling sort’ and ‘the poorer sort’. There was still much intermingling across social divides at communal festivities in which a broad cross-section might join in the dancing and ‘foolery’; this, however, was changing, with the better sort beginning to withdraw into select assembly rooms.

Most historians of the eighteenth-century Church have taken a clericalist and hierarchical view of the Church. Alan Gilbert, for example, saw the Church in terms of ‘clerical influence’, and claimed that there ‘had been a definite decline of popular religious practices because of the relaxation of state sanctions against irreligion’. Lay involvement in the Church of England is usually seen by historians as an aspect of social control. Gilbert suggested that

The Anglican clergy who particularly since 1689 had witnessed the gradual erosion of their traditional independent authority over the moral and religious behaviour of their parishioners, very often remained in a position to dictate religious norms by virtue of an alliance with local ruling elites. When a resident clergyman in a manageable parish enjoyed the whole

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hearted support of the local landowners and the magistracy he could guarantee high rates of religious practice.³

The evidence for this presumed alliance between parish clergy and local ruling elites is nowhere produced.

The research upon which this book is based does not suggest the somewhat negative attitude towards the Christian faith and the Church of England and its clergy implied by Gilbert and others. Rather, it suggests a deep attachment to Christian faith among a broad cross-section of people, as illustrated by their expectations of the clergy, their active involvement in the worship of their parish churches, the evidence for their personal devotional practices, their concern for the maintenance of Christian morality and peace between neighbours, their Christianly motivated philanthropy, concerned as it was with both the material and spiritual well-being of other people, and their substantial investment in repairing, extending, building and beautifying churches.

J. C. D. Clark has emphasised the importance of religious issues in eighteenth-century English political history. He has pointed out that in much of England during the first half of the century Anglicanism and society remained virtually coterminous, and that it was not a relationship in which the Church was subservient to the State.⁴ Clark has demonstrated the importance of the interaction between theology and politics in providing an ideology to underpin the relationship between Church and State, and has drawn attention to the intellectual vigour of the Anglican theological response to heterodox challenges between 1714 and 1754.⁵

The central role of the Church in English political and social life in the middle years of the eighteenth century has been demonstrated by Stephen Taylor in his study of the Duke of Newcastle's use of patronage.⁶ He illustrates the complexity of the interaction between Church and State, and shows how misleading it is to see the sanctions of Christianity as merely a form of social control used to ensure obedience and deference to social superiors. Preachers were aware that their teachings were directed as much at the better sort and their obligations to set an example as to the poorer sort. Taylor

³ A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740–1914* (1976), pp. 9–11.

⁴ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 136–8.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 303–6.

⁶ Stephen Taylor, *Church and State in England in the Mid-Eighteenth Century: The Newcastle Years 1742–1762*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1985.

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concludes that Newcastle's extensive management of the Crown's ecclesiastical patronage was dominated not by party politics, but by a desire to ensure that the Church was governed by competent pastors and administrators who were loyal to the State, which protected the Protestant succession and establishment.

Peter Laslett claimed that the first ten years of the eighteenth century were the final decade of what he called the 'old world'.⁷ He asserted that this was a Christian world marked by spontaneous religious activity, and that Christianity was 'in the social air which everyone alike breathed'. Laslett pointed out that the power of the influence of Christian belief and imperatives over the sexual habits of the peasantry was exercised, not so much by the authority of the clergy and the officials of the ecclesiastical courts, as by the force of universally held opinion.⁸ The evidence suggests that this 'old world' continued for much of the eighteenth century.

Religion, as has been noted, played a prominent role in politics, and also in the social life of urban communities. Peter Earle has shown that in London in the first thirty years of the eighteenth century the parish church provided a focus for neighbourhood life and pride.⁹ Peter Borsay has vividly illustrated the central role of the Church in the social and cultural life of English provincial towns in the eighteenth century. He has pointed out that welfare and religion were allied forces, and that the secular wealth and the spiritual energy of the period were directed towards charity and church building.¹⁰

Recent studies of charity and the movement for reforming moral behaviour in London in the eighteenth century have drawn attention to the central part played by Anglican lay people in these movements. During the first half of the century, charity was still regarded not merely as voluntary benevolence, but as mandatory justice entailed on the enjoyment of any form of property. It was thus a natural and inevitable activity for all Christians, and the vision of a Christian community tied together by gratitude and acts of kindness, by brotherly (and sisterly) feelings in Christ's name, continued to occupy an important place in social thought.¹¹

⁷ Laslett, *World We Have Lost*, p. 60. ⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 72–3.

⁹ Peter Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660–1730* (1989), pp. 62–3 and 244–8.

¹⁰ Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989).

¹¹ A. G. Craig, *The Movement for the Reformation of Manners 1688–1715*, Ph.D. thesis,

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These studies of eighteenth-century political and social history imply a lively religious life amongst lay people. Although most recent studies of the Church of England in the eighteenth century have concentrated on bishops and diocesan administration and the clergy,¹² a number have focused on lay people and their religious attitudes and practice.¹³ The fruits of much of this research have been distilled by John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor in an important collection of essays which argues for a reinterpretation of the place of religion in eighteenth-century England.¹⁴

There is now considerable information available about lay people's religious practice and much circumstantial evidence about their attitudes to religious faith, and its impact on their lives. The evidence upon which this study is based is drawn from a wide geographical compass from Cumberland to Bristol and from Pembrokeshire to Norfolk. It includes rural areas as well as towns and cities. There is information about old industrial areas like Norfolk and Wiltshire and from newly industrialising regions like Lancashire. The evidence is overwhelming that the practice of Christianity according to the formularies of the Church of England was central to most people's lives well beyond the first decade of the eighteenth century.

University of Edinburgh, 1980; Craig Rose, *Politics, Religion and Charity in Augustan London c 1680–1720*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1988; Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1989).

¹² See Arthur Warne, *Church and Society in Eighteenth Century Devon* (Newton Abbot, 1969); J. C. Shuler, *The Pastoral and Ecclesiastical Administration of the Diocese of Durham 1721–1771, with Particular Reference to the Archdeaconry of Northumberland*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Durham, 1975; John H. Pruett, *The Parish Clergy under the Later Stuarts: The Leicestershire Experience* (Urbana, Chicago, 1976); W. M. Marshall, *The Administration of the Dioceses of Hereford and Oxford 1660–1770*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 1978; W. M. Jacob, *Clergy and Society in Norfolk 1707–1806*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 1982; Viviane Barrie-Curien, *Clerge et pastorale en Angleterre au XVIIIe siècle – le diocèse de Londres* (Paris, 1992).

¹³ See, for example, Geraint H. Jenkins, *Literature, Religion and Society in Wales 1660–1730* (Cardiff, 1978); F. C. Mather, *Georgian Churchmanship Reconsidered: Some Variations in Anglican Public Worship 1714–1830*, *JEH*, 36 (1985), pp. 255–83; D. Spaeth, *Parsons and Parishioners: Lay–Clerical Conflict and Popular Piety in Wiltshire Villages 1660–1740*, Ph.D. thesis, Brown University, 1985; J. Barry, *The Parish Church in Civic Life: Bristol and its Churches 1660–1750*, in *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion 1350–1750*, ed. Susan Wright (1988); J. M. Albers, *Seeds of Contention: Society, Politics and the Church of England in Lancashire 1689–1790*, Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1988; M. Cross, *The Church and Local Society in the Diocese of Ely c 1630–c 1730*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1991; William Jeremy Gregory, *Archbishop, Cathedral and Parish: The Diocese of Canterbury 1660–1805*, D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1993.

¹⁴ *The Church of England c 1689–c 1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge, 1993).

The aim is to investigate what these parallel studies reveal about the attitudes of lay people in England and Wales to the established Church, and to examine the evidence for the expression of people's belief in God and the impact that this had on their lives and their world. If, as seems likely, it appears that Christian faith and practice were central in both public and private life at all levels of society, this will have implications for the continuing study of the political, social and economic history of the eighteenth century, as well as for the investigation of the backgrounds of the Methodist and Evangelical revivals.

This book is not concerned with those who dissented from the established Church. They were a small minority of the population – estimated to be only about 5.6 per cent in the early eighteenth century. Their influence was out of all proportion to their numbers, however, and at least in the early years of the century, this influence was greatly feared by Anglicans. They have consequently attracted much scholarly attention. Their story has most recently been chronicled by Michael Watts.¹⁵ This study is concerned with those who conformed to the established Church. More work, however, needs to be done on the relationship between dissenters and the established Church. There is evidence that the relationship was often relaxed and that the boundary between Church and dissent was porous to the extent that many dissenters attended their parish churches from time to time and that some Anglicans attended dissenting meeting houses. Members of the established Church have received relatively little attention from historians, and this book is intended to remedy this.

Most studies of religion in the eighteenth century have been concerned to show that developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had eighteenth-century origins.¹⁶ This book is concerned to see the period in its own right. As will be seen, the religious attitudes of the period may be more explicable in terms of the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. People, and especially clergy, were haunted by memories of the turmoil of the English Civil Wars. They may have been consciously seeking to re-establish a national Anglicanism, desiring to include dissenters rather than to exclude them. As will be seen there was considerable success in reintegrating elements of the Puritan and Laudian strands of the

¹⁵ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters from the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1985).

¹⁶ For example, Gilbert, *Religion and Society*.

Church to create a Church of England reformed according to the model of the 'primitive Church'. In many ways the Church of England in the first half of the eighteenth century marks the final stages of the Reformation in England, in which the great majority of English people were included in the national Church.

Religious belief is not quantifiable. Often there is little evidence, apart from the comments of zealots and enthusiasts, who tend to define the 'godly' in narrow terms, so as to exclude all those with whom they disagree.¹⁷ The average lay person is often perceived as a passive receptacle for religious truth communicated by a religious elite, who possess authentic religious doctrine and pure religious sensibilities. Although an elite of spiritually zealous lay people are sometimes seen as collaborators with the clergy, they run the risk of being viewed as either the dupes of the clergy, or as a standard against whom all other lay people are measured and found wanting. Historians of popular religion often proceed as if their task is to separate the grain from the chaff, winnowing beliefs and practices to distinguish between those that are truly religious and those that are superstitious and magical, or merely conventional.¹⁸ John Bossy has argued that in order to understand popular religion, English historians need to free themselves from a latent assumption that the only people whose religious outlook and behaviour are worth knowing about are, to take the word in a wide sense, the 'nonconformists'.¹⁹ Hugh McLeod has drawn attention to the need to remember the prevalence of diffuse Christianity, and to give attention to people whose beliefs are not clearly defined and who may have a foot in several camps.²⁰ As John Byrom noted, we go wrong if we suppose that those for whom Christianity is a 'plain calm business' are Erastians or Deists in thin disguise.²¹

This study is not concerned to quantify belief, but to explore the practice of religion and its social and economic expression amongst

¹⁷ For a discussion of the difficulties of this question with reference to the seventeenth century see Margaret Spufford, *Can We Count the 'Godly' and the 'Conformable' in the Seventeenth Century?*, *JEH*, 36 (1985), pp. 428–48.

¹⁸ For a discussion of these questions see Natalie Zemon Davies, *Some Tasks and Themes in the Study of Popular Religion*, in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. Charles Trinkaus and Heiko A. Obermon (Leiden, 1974), pp. 307–15.

¹⁹ John Bossy, *The Counter Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe*, *PP*, 47 (1970), pp. 51–2.

²⁰ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England* (Bangor, 1993), pp. 55–6.

²¹ John Byrom, *Remains*, I, Pt 2, (1835), p. 328, quoted in Donald Davie, *The Eighteenth Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 25.

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conformists in the first half of the eighteenth century. The bulk of the evidence used is not the judgements of the religious elite – bishops, zealous and judgemental higher clergy, and devout lay people – but the circumstantial, and often random, evidence that not obviously devout people have left behind them. Research about lay religious attitudes in the medieval Church shows that considerable evidence can be gleaned about what the Church meant for people by investigating their attitudes to paying tithes, to clerical involvement in making wills, to the sacraments, to worship, to preaching, to death and to their parish churches.²²

In the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there is additional evidence available in the form of diaries and letters, but it needs to be remembered that the information they contain is subjective, and that the views expressed by diarists and letter writers about their own and their contemporaries' religious practices may be not be typical. Most people did not keep diaries or write letters, so there is only a limited context in which to evaluate surviving diaries and letters. It is dangerous to generalise from a single diary or collection of letters. It may be slightly less dangerous to generalise from a small number of diaries and collections of letters representing a fairly broad social and geographical spread. Whilst evidence from diaries and letters is limited, other evidence is daunting in its quantity. The records of eighteenth-century diocesan and parochial administration are extensive and, apart from a few dioceses where local or regional studies have been undertaken, relatively unexplored. Much of the evidence on which the research for this book is based is derived from parish and borough records for the period and the records of the archdeacons' and consistory courts. Parish records from Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Yorkshire have been examined and compared with evidence from other areas available in print or in unpublished theses. Little use has previously been made of parish, archdeaconry and diocesan records of this period, but they contain much valuable information about attitudes to religious faith and practice at the local level.

In the past these sources have been interpreted from the point of view of the Church of England as an institution. They also throw light on the attitudes of lay people in the Church. It is easily forgotten that elected lay officials, the churchwardens of the parishes,

²² See, for example, Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370–1532* (Toronto, 1984).

were the key functionaries in the life of the Church at the local level. They monitored, on behalf of the Church, the moral life of their neighbours, the condition of the parish church and the conduct of the parish clergy, and reported offenders to the bishop's or arch-deacon's courts. In ecclesiastical court records in particular, the authentic voices of ordinary people are often heard. Parish records also show that lay people were energetic in funding additional daily services, the repair, building and beautification of parish churches and chapels, the endowment and management of schools and extensive philanthropic activities. The caution and prudence of the 'small man' is often expressed.

Another important source of evidence is church buildings and furnishings. Although most church buildings have undergone many alterations since the mid eighteenth century, much information still survives. Charity boards and inscriptions on monuments in churches, for example, throw significant light on the religious attitudes of lay people who made charitable donations or bequests, or wished, after death, to set the example of a good person before his or her neighbours. Once one starts looking there is abundant evidence in many churches, in inscriptions, monuments and furnishings, as well as sometimes the fabric itself, which provides information about people's religious faith and practice, and the time and money that were devoted to religious ends.

An investigation of the evidence helps to clarify the place of Christian faith in people's lives. It should indicate to what extent religion continued to be a significant factor in society in the first half of the eighteenth century, and to what extent lay people devoted time, energy and money to religious activities and ordered their lives in ways consistent with their beliefs.

The affairs of the local community were managed by the meeting of the vestry, which comprised the ratepayers of the parish (i.e. those who owned or leased property and contributed to the cost of maintaining communal facilities and, when necessary, the poorest members of the community). A few statutes governed the activities of vestries, giving them responsibility for the support of the poor, repairing the highways of the parish and enforcing rudimentary law and order. The vestry could levy rates for repairing the highways and for maintaining the poor, and each year elected, usually from among the ranks of the ratepayers, a surveyor to be responsible for the maintenance of the highway, two overseers to be responsible for

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the poor, a constable to be responsible for law and order and the two churchwardens to be responsible for the church building and to monitor the spiritual welfare of the parishioners and the conduct of the clergy. Women as well as men were elected overseers and churchwardens. At St Benedict's Lincoln women served as churchwardens in six years between 1720 and 1739. In 1739 both the churchwardens were women.²³ Towns too had this pattern of communal government. Populous cities like Norwich, Bristol and York were divided into parishes governed by vestries, as was the teeming city of London and its suburbs. Some towns and cities were incorporated by royal charter as boroughs, and sent representatives to Parliament. They had charters granting them specific privileges to govern certain of their own affairs, but these did not usually infringe the rights and duties of the vestries of the parishes in the town or city. Only if there was just one parish in the borough, as at King's Lynn, Boston, Tiverton or Wigan, did the common council of the borough effectively act as the vestry.²⁴

The vestry was likely to be a focus for communal tensions. Although surviving eighteenth-century vestry minute books often record only the decisions of the meetings, occasionally, these decisions suggest that they had been arrived at only after major disagreements, for example when it was resolved to limit the churchwardens' or overseers' spending, or to refuse to accept their proposals for the rate. Very occasionally a glimpse is offered of the workings of the machinery of communal life. In the mid 1750s the diary of Thomas Turner, a shopkeeper of East Hoathly in Sussex, who, as a ratepayer, was a member of the vestry, shows that vestry meetings might not be peaceable affairs. Most meetings at East Hoathly seem to have been difficult if not stormy. When it came to assessing the poor rate, all kinds of 'artifice and deceit, cunning and knavery' were used in order to conceal a ratepayer's liability. A rare picture is provided of the complexity of parish life and the clash of personalities in a vestry, which may or may not have been typical of other parishes.²⁵

It may have been a small-scale society, but all human life was to be found there, rich and poor, good and bad; all were caught up in the

²³ LAO Lincoln St Benedict's 7/2 Churchwardens' Account Book 1715–56.

²⁴ See, for example, W. M. Jacob, *Church and Borough: King's Lynn 1700–1750*, in *Crown and Mitre: Religion and Society in Northern Europe since the Reformation*, ed. W. M. Jacob and Nigel Yates (Woodbridge, 1993).

²⁵ *The Diary of Thomas Turner 1754–1765*, ed. David Vaisey (Oxford, 1984), p. xxxiv.