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

W. M. Jacob

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This book investigates the part that Anglicanism played in the lives of lay people in England and Wales between c. 1689 and 1750. It is concerned with what they did rather than what they believed, and explores their attitudes to clergy, religious activities, personal morality and charitable giving, especially in relation to education and health care, and church building and improvement.

Using evidence from diaries, letters, account books, newspapers and popular publications and parish and diocesan records, Dr Jacob demonstrates that Anglicanism held the allegiance of a significant proportion of all people. Lay people took the lead in managing the affairs of the parishes, which were the major focus of communal and social life, and supported the spiritual and moral discipline of the Church courts. The author shows that early-eighteenth-century England and Wales remained a largely traditional society and that Methodism emerged from a strong Church. Contrary to conventional views of the period, the Anglican Church was central to the lives of most people in England and Wales.

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Lincoln Theological College



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BL	British Library
DAD	Doncaster Archives Department
HCRO	Humberside County Record Office
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
KLBA	King's Lynn Borough Archives
LAO	Lincolnshire Archives Office
NCRO	Northumberland County Record Office
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
<i>PP</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
RCHM	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments for England
<i>SCH</i>	<i>Studies in Church History</i>
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
VCH	Victoria County History

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Preface

The history of the Church of England in the eighteenth century has been largely written from the viewpoint of the clergy, based on biographical studies of bishops and research about clergy in particular dioceses. Whilst such studies provide valuable information about those who were the leaders and opinion-formers in the Church, they give little information about the great mass of church people in England and Wales.

This book is concerned with the religious life of the lay people of the Church of England (which until 1920 included the Welsh dioceses), rather than with ecclesiastical government and organisation. It is not concerned with analysing people's beliefs, and to what extent they were orthodox or heterodox, or with their involvement in theological controversies. Rather, it is concerned with people's religious experience as members of the established Church.

Conventionally the period between the death of Anne and the 1830s is regarded as a period of slumber in the established Church, enlightened only by the Methodist and Evangelical revivals. It is popularly seen as irreligious, when unless there was a determined alliance between squire and parson, churches were neglected and the laity were notable by their absence. When the laity were dragooned into church by a squire and parson, they are depicted as expressing their contempt for religion by sleeping or misbehaving during services.

Numerous biographical and regional studies have indicated that some bishops and clergy during the period were conscientious in carrying out their duties. Recently social and political historians have noted evidence of the significance of religion in urban and political life during the period. Stimulated by these works, this study investigates the religious lives of men and women between the Toleration Act in 1689 and the emergence of Methodism. Its aims are ambitious:

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to explore the attitudes of lay people to clergy, the public religious observances and private religious practices of lay people, and their attitudes to morality and to charity and to church buildings.

The evidence is drawn from letters and diaries, from the observations of clergy and bishops, and from the reports, account books and minute books of parish officials. Whenever there is evidence of the experience and activities of women as well as men, this is noted. The wealth of physical evidence that eighteenth-century people have left in the form of the churches they built, altered and furnished and the inscriptions they put up on monuments to the dead has also been used. The quantity of evidence is vast. Extensive quotations are included from a wide social and geographical range in order to demonstrate the consistency of religious practice and of religion in the lives of a broad generality of people in England and Wales.

My curiosity about religion and society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was first prompted by the late Reverend Gerard Folland, sometime rector of Bawdeswell in Norfolk, who rebuilt his bomb-damaged parish church in the eighteenth-century manner, after the 'model of the primitive Christians'. His immense erudition helped me to be aware of parish records as a source for social and religious history.

My debt of gratitude to the staff of many record offices will be obvious. Miss Jean Kennedy and her staff at the Norfolk Record Office have answered my requests for documents for many years. Susan Maddock of the Norfolk Record Office most helpfully provided access to King's Lynn Borough Archives. The staff of Lincolnshire Archives Office produced all the eighteenth-century Lincolnshire churchwardens' accounts in their custody for me. The staffs of Doncaster Archives Department and Humberside County Record Office have been most helpful, as were the Archivist of the Sir John Cass Foundation and the staff of the Guildhall Library. I have been grateful for access to the resources of the Library of the Institute of Historical Research, the Bodleian Library, the British Library, Nottingham University Library and the Sibthorpe Library at Bishop Grosseteste College, Lincoln. Caroline Dicker, the Librarian of Lincoln Theological College, has been of great assistance in obtaining books to meet my often rushed timetable.

Many people have provided me with helpful references, especially for areas with which I have been unfamiliar. I am particularly grateful to Dr Lynne Broughton for leads in architecture and music.

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Dr John Guy has also provided helpful information about diaries and collections of letters. Many friends have drawn my attention to eighteenth-century monumental inscriptions and have then had to wait patiently while I transcribed them. My colleagues at Lincoln Theological College generously covered my work during a period of study leave when much of the research upon which this book is based was undertaken. Mike Smith and Mark Christian have provided invaluable assistance with the intricacies of wordprocessing. My greatest debt is to Dr Frances Knight and to Dr Nigel Yates, both of whom exceeded the calls of friendship in reading complete drafts of this book. Their perceptive and sharp comments have considerably improved the text. Responsibility for the interpretation of the evidence and the judgements made thereon rest entirely with me.