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978-0-521-65711-2 - The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society

Frances Knight

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This is the first study to consider the meaning of Anglicanism for ordinary people in nineteenth-century England. Drawing extensively on unpublished sources, particularly those for rural areas, Frances Knight analyses the beliefs and practices of lay Anglicans and of the clergy who ministered to them. Building on arguments that the Church of England was in transition from State Church to denomination, she argues that strong continuities with the past nevertheless remained. Through an examination of denominational identity, personal piety, Sunday church-going and Anglican rites of passage she shows that the Church continued to cater for the beliefs and values of many Christians. Far from becoming a minority sect, the Anglican Church in the mid-Victorian period continued to claim the allegiance of one in four English people.

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To Clive Bright

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Preface

The history of the Church of England in the nineteenth century has been largely written from the centre, from the perspective of events in Oxford and Cambridge, Lambeth and Westminster, the cathedral close and the episcopal palace. It has tended to dwell on the problems and priorities of the men who were at home in such places. The result is that historians have devoted a great proportion of their energies to a relatively small proportion of the Church. An examination of the thought of prelates, politicians and dons provides a valuable insight into the minds of those in the vanguard of shaping opinion, but it avoids the question of how (or even if) their ideas were assimilated in the country at large.

This book looks at the Church at the parish level in order to reconstruct the religious world of the nineteenth-century Anglican, and to examine the impact that the policies being formulated at the top of the ecclesiastical hierarchy had on the parishioners and clergy of England. Not all change was initiated from above; nor were the laity and parochial clergy passive in their response to it. As is demonstrated by projects to restore churches and to build schools, many plans were brought to fruition locally, with little reference to the Church's hierarchy. This study attempts to recapture something of the varied experience of church people and the clergy who ministered to them, and to consider both the national and local influences to which they were subject. It does not seek to analyse Anglicanism as a disembodied belief system, still less as a series of theological conflicts. Rather, it is a study of Anglicanism as an experience that was lived by a large number of English people.

The period from 1800 to 1870 may have been one of change and upheaval, but there remained strong continuities with the past. For most of the period laymen remained able to exercise considerable influence in their parish church, as parish clerks, churchwardens and

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vestrymen. To this extent it was still a Church in which the lay voice had to be taken seriously. The persistence of a supernatural understanding of the world remained widespread during the period. There was a general belief that prayer, if offered with sufficient conviction, could change the way in which the world worked, and that death was not the end of life, but the gateway to heaven or hell. It was usual for most people, with the exception of the unchurched urban poor, to make some form of deliberate choice about religious matters – even if the choice of Anglicanism did not always result in regular church attendance.

The aims of this study are broad and ambitious. After a brief historiographical introduction, lay religion and the notion of Anglican identity are explored. Lay piety is investigated through contemporary approaches to the Bible, the Prayer Book and the concept of salvation. The study moves from the private to the public realm by analysing the role of parish churches in local communities, exploring their transition from providers of charity and poor relief to a more exclusive concern with the conduct of public worship and the occasional offices that marked social rites of passage. The focus then shifts from the laity to their clergy, explores the forces for change in clerical lives, and in particular the impact of the Ecclesiastical Commission's policies. The changing relationship between laity and clergy, and the shift in authority and control which accompanied this development is considered.

This project, which began as a PhD thesis that investigated the Church of England in the South and East Midlands, is no longer simply a local study. Original research on the counties of Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire has been supplemented by the use of printed sources for certain other English counties. Although some reference is made to Aylesbury, Bedford, Cambridge, Lincoln, Newark and Nottingham, the book concentrates upon rural central England. This is in part an attempt to compensate for what appears to be an overly urban approach in nineteenth-century history, which ignores the fact that, until 1850, more people lived in the country than the town. The book gains internal coherence by giving particular attention to the diocese of Lincoln during the episcopate of John Kaye, from 1827 to 1853. Kaye was a 'reforming' bishop in the same tradition as his close associate C. J. Blomfield of London, yet he remains a little-known figure in the nineteenth-century Church. Like Blomfield, Kaye was a founder

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member of the Ecclesiastical Commission, and was zealous in putting its policies into practice. The diocese of Lincoln, therefore, provides a particularly apposite case-study of the impact of the reform movement at the grass-roots. Although this book disclaims to be a local study, its author is well aware of having considered only a fraction of the available evidence, which is scattered all over England. An exhaustive investigation of all sources could occupy a team of researchers for years, and could not be undertaken.

During the years which led up to the writing of this book, I have been assisted, supported and encouraged by many individuals and institutions. Five years as a student among the theologians at King's College, London provided a stimulating start. I owe much to Judith Champ, who introduced me to church history and supervised my initial explorations, to Bruce Kinsey, a fellow traveller at King's (and now Cambridge) and to Ian Markham, who once suggested that I write a book on lay religion. Anthony Machen gave early encouragement to my post-graduate studies, and would have been pleased to see the publication of this book. Sadly, he died in 1988.

At Cambridge my doctoral research was supervised by David Thompson, whose shrewd observations and extensive knowledge saved me from going wrong at a number of points. I have benefited from the comments of those who read the thesis that resulted – Rod Ambler, Arthur Burns, Eamon Duffy, Sheridan Gilley, Eileen Groth, John Morrill and Peter Nockles.

Research and writing were made possible by the British Academy, who awarded me a major state studentship and then a post-doctoral fellowship. I have also been financially assisted by the University of Cambridge, who elected me to a Crosse studentship in 1989/90. Selwyn College elected me to a research fellowship which ran concurrently with my British Academy fellowship. They provided a sunny room in west Cambridge with a view of apple blossom and bluebells in the springtime. It was a pleasant setting in which to work on this and other projects, and the College itself proved an appropriate environment in which to study Anglican history. I also have reason to be grateful for the generosity of the Principal and Fellows of Newnham College, Cambridge. I am indebted to my father, Edmund Knight, for helping me with the proofs of this book.

It was invaluable to have access to the collections at the Cambridge University Library, the British Library, Lambeth Palace Library, SPCK in Marylebone Road, the Bodleian Library and Pusey House,

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Oxford. The staff at the Lincolnshire Archives Office were unfailingly patient and helpful, and the search room officer, Nigel Colley, made some very useful suggestions.

I have benefited from the friendship of a number of religious historians, of whom two deserve special mention in the present context. Mary Heimann has been a constant source of encouragement and good sense. She read this book in instalments as it was being written, commenting on it with insight and precision. Bill Jacob supported the research from the beginning – initially by allowing me to live at Lincoln Theological College whilst working at the Lincolnshire Archives Office. I asked to stay for seven weeks, but my visit lasted for two and a half years. He too has commented carefully on these chapters, and has helped me to develop some of my ideas. Both Mary and Bill have saved me from numerous errors, omissions and infelicities, but I take full responsibility for those which remain.

The person to whom I owe the most is my husband Clive Bright. He has always been an enthusiastic supporter of my various endeavours, and he has lived with versions of this project for almost as long as he has lived with me. Throughout it all, he has remained cheerfully tolerant of my seemingly undying interest in dead Anglicans. This book is dedicated to him, with love.

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Abbreviations

ACS	Additional Curates Society
BL	British Library
Bodl	Bodleian Library
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CPAS	Church Pastoral Aid Society
CUL	Cambridge University Library
EDR	Ely Diocesan Records
ICBS	Incorporated Church Building Society
LAO	Lincolnshire Archives Office
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
PH	Pusey House
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

In the manuscript material which has been cited in the text, the original spelling and punctuation has been retained.