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The Late Medieval English Church: Vitality and Vulnerability Before the Break with Rome

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Author:
G. W. Bernard
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Katherine Harvey

One of the greatest challenges facing the historian is the problem of hindsight: we cannot un-know what happened next, but must nevertheless try to avoid seeing the past through a distorted lens. Hindsight does, however, have its advantages, and one of them is that it focuses attention on areas of the past which might otherwise be relatively neglected. It seems highly unlikely, for example, that the English Church of the late 15th and early 16th centuries would have attracted the attention of so many scholars were it not for our need to explain one of the most dramatic moments in English history, the English Reformation. We have hindsight to thank, therefore, for the existence of a large number of high quality studies of the late medieval church, many of them produced over the past two decades in response to one of the most influential of the many volumes on the subject, Eamon Duffy?s *The Stripping of the Altars*.(1) *The Late Medieval English Church* is George Bernard?s response to the Duffy thesis, prompted by his conviction that *The Stripping of the Altars* ?did not tell the full story and ? left the subsequent reformation inexplicable.? Taking a broad approach to the late medieval church (with a slight bias towards the idea of the church as an institution, rather than as a community of believers), he evaluates it in terms of vitality and vulnerability. The book opens with a chapter on the Hunne Affair. The case of Richard Hunne ? a London merchant tailor and suspected heretic who died in mysterious circumstances whilst imprisoned in the Lollards? Tower at St

Paul?s Cathedral ? will be extremely familiar to any historian (and indeed student) of the late medieval English church, but here we are provided with a new interpretation of the mystery which has exercised historians for centuries: was Hunne killed, or did he kill himself? Combining the testimony of Thomas More with the records of the King?s Bench, Bernard stresses the role of Henry VIII in this case, and comes to the conclusion ?that Hunne committed suicide is all too plausible?. This reinterpretation will not convince all readers, but it certainly challenges us to rethink our opinions of the familiar, and in doing so very much sets the tone for the volume.

The tale of Richard Hunne nicely encapsulates many of the key themes of Bernard?s study, and from this springboard he launches into a sequence of eight thematic chapters on various aspects of the late medieval church. Chapter two, ?The monarchical church?, examines the relationship between crown and church in later medieval England. The first half of the chapter takes a long view, identifying the late 13th century as a turning point in church-state relations, with particular emphasis being placed on the king?s role in ecclesiastical appointments, royal taxation of the church, and ecclesiastical support for the crown, especially in times of conflict. The second portion focuses on the late 15th and early 16th centuries, uncovering the major causes of tension (primarily familiar issues such as benefit of clergy and the role of the Papacy) between crown and church in the years leading up to the Reformation. For Bernard, the ?symbiotic relationship between crown and church? was one of the strengths of the late medieval church, but also one of its weaknesses. Since the relationship was largely beneficial to the church, there was no ?coherent or sustained campaign? for its freedoms. Instead, there were intermittent objections to specific royal actions (usually relating to small points of jurisdiction), which simply served to make the church appear petty and self-interested.

The next pair of chapters examines the personnel of the late medieval church: ?Bishops? (chapter three) and ?Clergy? (chapter four). The first of these highlights the many challenges faced by the medieval bishop, and the contradictions inherent in his office. Late medieval prelates were still trying to live up to an ideal created in apostolic times; their attempts to adhere to standards which were both impossibly high and hopelessly out-dated were doomed to failure. Many of their problems were linked to the existence of the monarchical church: bishops were expected to serve the crown, but would inevitably be criticised for becoming entangled in worldly affairs. The suggestion that there were no late medieval saint-bishops because there was ?a sparsity of truly holy men? seems a little simplistic, not least because late medieval changes to the mechanisms of saint-making meant that holiness was far from being the only factor that determined an individual?s chances of canonisation. Overall, however, this is an understanding portrayal of a group of men who did their best to ?muddle through? in challenging circumstances.

Similarly, Bernard is broadly sympathetic to the plight of the lower clergy who form the subject of chapter four. Like the bishops, they attempted to live up to unrealistic ideals and, like the bishops, many of them failed in their efforts. The numerous problem areas (amongst them celibacy, learning and preaching, pluralism and non-residence, and involvement in secular affairs) are examined in turn. The cathedral clergy were, Bernard suggests, particularly worldly, and therefore particularly vulnerable to criticism. Out in the parishes, the picture was far more complex: some priests were very good, some very bad, and most fell somewhere in between. As Bernard himself points out, it is immensely difficult to make valid generalisations about such a large number of individuals.

Chapters five and six examine an even larger group: the laity. The first of these chapters, ?Lay knowledge?, considers the religious commitment and understanding of late medieval laymen and women. There is, Bernard suggests, substantial evidence for popular devotion, but by the evidence for popular understanding he is somewhat less convinced: ?ignorance and misunderstanding of Christian theology? was ?one of the greatest areas of vulnerability of the church.? In addition, there may have been an increasing divide between the growing minority of individuals who sought to live ?model Christian lives? and the rest of the population; ironically, the intense devotions of the most pious served to highlight the inadequacies of the less devout, and thus undermined the church as a whole. Chapter six, ?Lay activity?, takes a closer look at two specific aspects of lay piety: confraternities and chantries, and pilgrimage. Both flourished in the later Middle Ages, and serve as important evidence of the strength of popular devotion. But here too was

vulnerability, for it was all too easy to point out that there were too few priests to celebrate as many masses for the dead as were requested, or to question the motives of those who went on pilgrimage, or to suggest that much-worshipped relics were not what they were purported to be.

A brief seventh chapter, ?Criticism?, considers popular anti-clericalism. Disputes between church and laity were not infrequent, with the main causes of such disputes relating to finance and jurisdiction: tithes, mortuary fees and the probate of wills were all relatively common causes of contention. Townsfolk and cathedral chapters were often at odds, and there was probably some popular resentment at the considerable wealth of the church. For Bernard, however, none of this suggests that there was widespread anti-clericalism: violence against the clergy was extremely rare, and much of the contemporary criticism came from the church itself. Critics typically directed their anger not at the church as a whole, but at individuals who were perceived to have failed to live up to the standards of the church.

The eighth chapter re-examines ?The condition of the monasteries? in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. The picture is not entirely bleak: recruitment remained high into the early years of the 16th century, intellectual pursuits and learning flourished in many religious houses, and the vast majority of monks and nuns would appear to have been genuinely committed to the religious life. Certainly, very few were guilty of the lurid crimes of which the reformers accused them. Yet there were also many problems, and many religious were somewhat preoccupied with worldly affairs: profitable agricultural enterprises, costly building projects, and the cultivation of wealthy lay patrons. Monasteries ?were becoming cosy, comfortable and inward-looking?, and early 16th-century bishops (including Thomas Wolsey) were convinced that reform was needed. Like many of his predecessors in this field, Bernard sees the monasteries as one of the greatest weaknesses of the late medieval church.

In its final chapter, ?Heresy?, the book returns to its starting point. Bernard traces the English experience of heresy from the end of the 14th century to the beginning of the 16th, and argues that the evidence for its existence is somewhat limited. Some historians have assumed that the surviving records of heresy reflect only the tip of the iceberg, with Lollardy being widespread by the early 16th century. Here, however, we are encouraged to think again about the nature of anti-heresy campaigns: was Lollardy essentially an artificial construct or, as Bernard puts it, ?Were the ?lollards? the witches of early Tudor England?? Attempts to counter heresy were, it is suggested, manifestations of reforming spirit within the late medieval church, and should be seen as evidence of that institution?s vitality.

The church which emerges from this study is a vibrant and dynamic institution, and the Reformation does not appear to have been in the least bit inevitable. In many respects, this version of the late medieval church is not so different from that presented by Duffy and his followers. But Bernard?s church is not without its flaws. If this is a less impassioned account of the late medieval church than Duffy?s, it is also more even-handed and nuanced. We see both the vitality and the vulnerability, the light and the shade, and the overlap between the two; some of the church?s greatest strengths also numbered amongst its most serious weaknesses. Undergraduates tackling essays on the strengths and weaknesses of the late medieval church should be eternally grateful to Professor Bernard for providing them with both sides of the argument in a single volume.

What the reader will not find in this volume are the roots of the English Reformation. Whilst the English Church had vulnerabilities which the reformers were able to exploit, the existence of these vulnerabilities would not seem to explain why a reform movement came into being in 1520s England. Indeed, some of the vulnerabilities which Bernard identifies in the late medieval church apply equally to religion as a whole. Much emphasis is placed on the impossibly high ideals which the late medieval church aspired to, and failed to meet ? but surely the pursuit of impossibly high standards is the raison d?être of the majority of religions. Even more striking are the many similarities between the English church of the early 16th century, and the same institution in the 15th, 14th and even 13th centuries. If the vulnerabilities of the late medieval church were, for the most part, centuries old, then where does that leave our quest for the causes of the English Reformation? Such questions are clearly beyond the scope of this particular work, but that they arise at all is an indication of the extent to which Bernard succeeds in making his reader think about the bigger picture.

Overall then, this is a deeply engaging and thought-provoking study of a familiar and thorny problem. One of Bernard?s great strengths as a historian is his ability to take a historical problem which has been endlessly discussed, and to reinvigorate the debate. Once again he has succeeded in doing so; this volume will undoubtedly encourage its readers to rethink their opinion of the late medieval church. Hopefully it will also attract interest beyond the world of Reformation scholars; there is certainly much here to interest the medieval ecclesiastical historian, and indeed the general reader. The combination of a perennially appealing subject and Bernard?s clear, engaging prose make for an extremely readable book which deserves a wide audience.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400?1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992).Back to (1)

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