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Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480-1750

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Worshippers at the main dominical services of the Church of England have, with greater or lesser frequency according to usage, custom, or personal inclination from 1549, and until the revision of the prayer book in 1980, publicly and collectively asserted their belief in 'The Resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'. At the greater feasts of the church the Apostles' Creed was replaced by that of Athanasius. The second coming of Christ, accompanied by a bodily resurrection at which 'all men' would give an account of their works were included in its more detailed statements of belief. Those that had 'done good' would go into 'life everlasting' those that had done evil 'into everlasting fire'. The creeds were also made familiar through instruction in the catechism both before and after the Reformation. Ideally individuals were examined on them as part of confession, which was made at least annually at Easter tide, while from 1549 a knowledge of 'the articles of the faith' was laid down as a prerequisite for confirmation.

To whatever extent the apparent simplicity of these teachings were assimilated by those who repeated and learnt them, they were available to comfort not only to people facing the inescapable reality of their own deaths, but as consolation to those who mourned them. In early modern England death reached from beyond the immediate circumstances of an individual's physical dissolution to permeate society, not just in the mental world of individuals, but through a changing, although pervasive culture of death, that found expression through the spoken and printed word, in rites and observances and the more enduring material culture through which at least some of the dead were commemorated.

The sentences from the Anglican prayer book that were said as the corpse was prepared for burial reminded the mourners that 'In the midst of life we are in death'. When it came death was, for the most part, experienced in people's own homes. Accidental death was proportionately less significant than in modern

times. Concern with the proper observance of the last things meant that in the late middle ages the swiftness of a sudden death, whether accidental or not, was not necessarily welcomed, while the suffrages of the Anglican Litany included a supplication for deliverance from it. The experience of death was therefore shared widely within communities, although as much as a phenomenon to be prepared for, and to be remembered, as a present event. It did come early to many, and the frequency with which death was experienced in towns points up the vulnerability of their populations; but while their parish registers provide evidence of the searing effect of outbreaks of infectious disease, such was the size of the communities in which a majority of the people of England lived that the tolling bell which marked a death was far from being an everyday experience.

The church's official teachings on death, what was actually believed, and the varying ways in which people either individually or collectively, internally or publicly, came to terms with it, are all areas that, singly or together, provide a rich field for students from a variety of disciplines. Professor Houlbrooke's considerable achievement is to embrace a wide range of these insights and approaches in order to provide what he describes as an investigation of 'the effects of religious change on the social history of death'. Moving from an analysis of the incidence and causes of death, he builds up a picture of perceptions of the afterlife in Christian belief, although set in a wider context than the period that is his immediate concern, to study the changing ways in which death was prepared for, experienced, managed and commemorated. His Conclusion surveys the long-term changes that occurred in 'the culture of death'. The use of the phrase is significant, for while the events that surrounded the corporeal reality of death and its commemoration provide the material for an empirical approach to its social history, its other worldly dimension meant that it was apprehended through religious belief. In approaching his subject by way of the history of religious change Professor Houlbrooke provides a coherently convincing basis for his richly textured study in which the changes of the Protestant Reformation were a pivotal point.

The uncertainties of life fed the constant injunctions of divines on the necessity of preparing for death. Even the thoughts of someone as corporeally preoccupied as Samuel Pepys occasionally turned to it, but the concerns that he recorded were more with the need to order his material affairs than with the state of his soul. The extent to which individuals were receptive to warnings to prepare for death depended on their age, sex, personal character and experience, although this was not simply a function of old age. One important part of preparation was the making of a will and, despite the church's insistence on its importance as a Christian duty, it was a task that was faced with reluctance. Nonetheless, whether they were made early or late, and whatever the circumstances in which this was done, wills are a potentially valuable source on which to base an analysis not only of the material concerns, but of the attitudes and assumptions of a relatively large number of people in the face of death.

Professor Houlbrooke uses the extensive literature that has arisen from the study of wills in two excellent chapters that lie at the heart of a sensitively nuanced examination of preparation for death. His analysis is grounded in his own work on six hundred wills from the archdeaconries Berkshire and Norfolk for the 240 years from 1500. It also draws widely on other printed collections of wills; but for all the considerable skill that he employs, and his awareness of the problems that are inherent in the use of documents that appear to be so beguilingly informative, the fact remains that there must be considerable doubts remaining about the representativeness of even this wide range of material. There is an average of some 2.5 wills a year from both areas, while Professor Houlbrooke knows his material too well not to be also aware of the relatively limited social groups who made the wills and of the extent to which they were, of their very nature, over representative of propertied interests. Although he sees his analysis as 'penetrating the lower strata of testators', and presents us with some of the evidence for this, as well as for changes in the composition of the social groups who made wills, we are left with what are primarily the attitudes and assumptions of those who had at least some property to dispose of, whether this was done for the good of their souls or the material benefit of those that they were leaving behind.

Wills show the ways in which the testamentary strategies of individuals were structured by law, as well as by formal religious beliefs and observances. They also provide important evidence of the extent to which the parameters to will making changed over time. The material from church court proceedings that is used to

such good effect by Professor Houlbrooke also demonstrates how the contingencies of personal and local circumstances affected the process. The use of scribes sympathetic to the religious position of the testator is an example of the extent to which individuals were able to exercise control over will making within the constraints of custom and practice, but there is also evidence of significant regional differences. Religious guilds or confraternities which have been shown to have had an important influence on the culture of death in the late middle ages retained their importance into the 1530s.⁽¹⁾ Yet Professor Houlbrooke shows that their importance in the eyes of testators appears to have varied from one part of the country to another. While a substantial majority of Norfolk wills included bequests to these institutions, they were remembered in only a minority of wills from Berkshire and Buckinghamshire.

The distribution of funeral doles was becoming more common among the middling ranks of society in the sixteenth century. It was another aspect of the observances that surrounded death in which there were significant regional differences. At Whickham in county Durham - a community that was profoundly affected by the growth of coal mining - regional custom and practice constrained the ways in which people were able to dispose of their movable goods, but there were still considerable changes to funeral practices from the 1580s. These were influenced by the ways in which social structures and relations were modified by the industrial development of the parish. Not only did doles replace the occasional donation of small sums to the parish poor man's box, but they became larger and more common. The custom persisted into the third quarter of the seventeenth century until replaced by less frequent charitable bequests that were more directed to specific purposes.⁽²⁾

In Whickham the community of the workplace replaced the parish in providing for the funerals of its poorer members, so that pit men were brought for burial by the overmen under whom they worked, while workers from the local manufactory were buried at the expense of a fund that also laid out money for refreshments for their fellow workmen. It was essentially a transaction among equals, and was less a funeral dole than the food and drink that the parish authorities continued to provide in some parts of the country in the seventeenth century. Their willingness to meet the costs of this was based on a shared understanding of what constituted a proper provision of funeral rites. Evidence for the extent to which they continued to do this, and for any regional variations in the practice, is less tangible and, because it deals with the poor, is separate from the material that can be extracted from wills and administration accounts. Yet the extent to which doles, or indeed any other usage, were abandoned by parish officers while being retained by people of greater wealth or higher status, and the ways in which this reflects the development of different attitudes to death, as well as the reasons for them, must remain elusive.⁽³⁾

An observance that appears to have been much more closely related to wealth and status was the funeral sermon which became increasingly popular in the seventeenth century. As Professor Houlbrooke shows in a chapter based on a total of over 1,300 published sermons preached by Anglican or Protestant Nonconformist divines, they were not specifically associated with any particular type of churchmanship. Although the Church of England favoured funeral sermons for the instruction that they imparted, those who provided them were motivated as much by the desire to commemorate the dead as to edify the living. Their provision was dependent on the ability as well as the willingness of people to pay for them, and they do not appear to be among the items of expenditure that were allowed for pauper funerals in even the more generous parishes. The marked regional differences in their distribution cannot, however, be attributed simply to levels of wealth: a growing preference for funeral sermons in Kent from the 1590s could be related to religious developments within the county, although any such analysis would still need to take account of local diversity. Funeral doles continued to be relatively more important in Lincolnshire until well into the seventeenth century, and the spread of funeral sermons appears to have been inhibited by a conservatism that remained strong enough to adapt even these new forms to more traditionalist ends. The Lincolnshire man who in 1600 ordered that as many as three funeral sermons should be preached for him was perhaps seeking the accumulated merit that he would have gained through the provision of a number of masses three quarters of a century earlier.⁽⁴⁾

Professor Houlbrooke notes the importance of the spread of literacy, and the significant role that reading and writing played, not only in commemoration, but in communicating ideas about death. Yet legal documents

such as wills and administration accounts, printed funeral sermons and - another important source for the history of death - the personal journal, remained unnecessary, even meaningless, for a substantial section of the population in late medieval and early modern England. They continued to encounter many of the teachings, ideas and associations that surrounded death through visual images. Professor Houlbrooke provides an evocative discussion of the value of funeral monuments as measures of changes in attitudes to death, but for all his skill he is unable to exploit fully their potential as a source for understanding changing attitudes to death because of the lack of illustrations in his book. This presents serious problems in approaching the ways in which death was apprehended by the illiterate since the spread of printing had made pictorial material more widely accessible and illustrations of death bed scenes and of visions of the after life became available in printed editions from the late fifteenth century.(5)

These striking visual images - which were often accompanied by a brief text - are discussed by Professor Houlbrooke . He suggests that this imagery may have influenced the death bed experience of some individuals - possibly religious conservatives - into the seventeenth century, although cheap woodcuts with more distinctively Catholic images were early victims of the English Reformation. Nonetheless, death continued to be included among the themes illustrated in this way, although shorn of the spiritual dimensions of the publications that illustrated the art of dying. These prints presented an image of death that was omnipresent but, in a conceit that first became common in the early sixteenth century, it was joined in a ring dance with beggars as well as kings. Pinned, among other places, to the walls of alehouses, the prints were part of a broad popular culture less touched by the graver formalities of the church or the formal norms of the civil community. Here death could be diminished in ironic jest, or explained and given a measure of meaning through the medley of folk beliefs and customs that had become attached to it. There was ultimately no way by which it could be avoided, and its significance as a common experience, while posing considerable methodological challenges, means that, handled as skilfully as is done in this book, its study can still bring rich rewards for religious and social historians.(6)

Notes

1. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: traditional religion in England c.1400-c.1580*, London, 1992, p. 142.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society. Whickham 1560-1795*, Oxford, 1991, pp. 241-2, 283-4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid., p. 343; C. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*, London 1984, pp.61-3, 161-3.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual*, pp. 138, 240-1.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 316-17, Plates 117-119, 127-8.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 131, 162-5, 330.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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