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The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village

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Eamon Duffy?s *The Stripping of the Altars* (Yale, 1992) provided a broad, compelling account of popular religion in England before and during the Reformation, and was a book which undoubtedly changed the way we think about late medieval Catholicism and the popular experience of religious change. *The Voices of Morebath* is, as the author admits in the preface, in part a ?pendant? to that larger work, and the metaphor is a good one. This book is a gem: small, colourful, many-faceted. It is based for the most part upon a single source, namely the parish accounts from Morebath, a remote Devonshire village twenty-five miles north of Exeter. For fifty-four years the man responsible for keeping these accounts was Christopher Trychay, the village priest from 1520 to 1574. The records he kept were more than mere accounting: the life of the parish, the preoccupations of its priest and the material consequences of religious change appear in vivid detail, meticulously noted. The result is one man?s careful record of the English Reformation at parish level.

The Morebath accounts have long been known as a valuable source. A version was published in 1904 by J. Erskine Binney, who had himself been vicar of Morebath. Duffy, however, makes these records speak as never before, whilst incidentally clearing up some of the errors made by the first transcriber. He extracts

from them an account of how this Tudor parish functioned in the 1520s, and how it survived the vicissitudes of the mid-Tudor period. The gradual erosion of traditional practice under Henry VIII gives way to the more radical initiatives of Edward VI?s reign, where the manuscript ?positively breathes a sense of crisis?, in particular with the startling inclusion in the parish accounts of payments to equip the five Morebath men who joined the 1549 rebellion. These accounts also bear witness to the flurry of activity which greeted the Marian restoration, and the slow adaptation to conformity in the first sixteen years of Elizabeth?s reign. This book is in one sense a biography of Christopher Trychay?s working life, and it concludes with his death. In another sense it could be seen as a biography of Morebath?s Tudor Catholicism, which also, by the end, seems dead and gone.

The Voices of Morebath is a highly personal account on two levels. Perhaps the chief highlight of the book is the immediate acquaintance it gives with Christopher Trychay, whom Duffy refers to throughout as ?Sir Christopher?, according him the usual honorific title given to priests at that time. He emerges as a strong, sometimes pedantic, occasionally difficult man, with a pithy and powerful turn of phrase. He had definite ideas about how his parishioners should behave, and he encouraged them to cooperate, not least by being as meticulous in his records of those who failed to contribute to parish expenses as he was in recording those who were more generous. Duffy argues that some, at least, of the written record was meant to be read aloud, and this seems probable. So we get to see Sir Christopher standing in the church as he addresses the parish on the subject of the four large flagstones ?that lay here be fore the quyre dore?: he is standing in front of the chancel screen as he speaks. We can even hear his voice with its Devon accent that renders ?font? as ?vawnte?, or can describe someone as a ?nonest? woman. The fragments of Latin that drop into his accounts, mingled together with English, support Duffy?s argument that church Latin may not have been as alien to popular understanding as we sometimes think. As he gives account of his parishioners obligations and bequests, he provides a map of his community, a ?beating of the bounds? by the written and spoken word. His determination to dedicate the side altar to the local saint, St. Sidwell, and encourage her cult, is successful, and it is interesting to note that he baptizes a girl called Sidwell after the saint as late as 1570. When the book concludes with his last will and testament, there is something very touching in the admission that ?at the making of this will I have but little money and but one quick beast?, and when this feisty octogenarian dies, and is symbolically laid to rest between the old altar place and the new communion table, it is hard not to mourn.

Yet this is in part because Christopher Trychay?s evident personal involvement in the fortunes of his parish is clearly matched by that of the author. *The Stripping of the Altars* was a very moving book, written with an intense and imaginative appreciation of religion as a social and personal experience. *The Voices of Morebath* has some of the same quality, and reiterates some of the same conclusions. It lovingly illustrates the extent of communal involvement in the small and precious rituals of the church year, drawing out enormous significance from the minutiae of tiny bequests and careful purchases. In 1529 one female parishioner leaves her silver wedding ring which is melted down to make a little silver shoe for the figure of St. Sidwell, the local saint. Five years later, a thief breaks in and takes the silver shoe, along with a chalice, and the sense of outrage is immediate. And when the young people of the parish club together and voluntarily produce the money for a new chalice, Duffy is in no doubt that the priest?s entry in the accounts concerning their effort must have been ?recorded with pride.? Equally, when Christopher Trychay finally achieves the purchase of a new set of black vestments for requiem masses, the crowning achievement of twenty years painstaking effort, it is hard not to rejoice with him. The sense of loss is palpable, therefore, when the images, vestments and traditional trappings are removed under the new Protestant order. In many ways this book is an elegy on the loss of our Catholic past. When describing how the country parishes dutifully responded to the death of Mary I in 1558 with the appropriate ceremonies, for Duffy these were ?the funeral rites of Catholic England.?

Yet the emotional force of this vision of the Reformation can sometimes be as misleading as it is beguiling. Pre-Reformation religion was undoubtedly the focus for great popular piety which bore fruit in communal involvement in parish ritual, and had its material expression in church decorations, particularly the images of the saints. Yet to call this level of communal participation ?staggering? seems over-emphatic, and fails to take account that this kind of engagement was equally present after the Reformation, albeit in different

forms. Parish religion constantly alters and adapts to changing circumstances, and Reformation changes may not have seemed as radical at the time as they have appeared subsequently. The Henrician Reformation which began to encroach upon the old ways, especially in its restrictions on the use of images, is portrayed as an ineluctable slide towards Protestantism, yet there no conclusive proof that contemporaries saw it that way; in fact it is clear that denied one form of devotional expression, the Morebath parishioners turned to another, and fulfilled the 1538 Injunctions more speedily than many parishes.

The difficulty with Duffy?s interpretation is that it has a tendency to describe the popular experience of Reformation in terms of triumph and tragedy, when there was also so much that was mundane, and so much that remained the same. His is a vision of the Reformation as an assault upon a whole way of life, or as the author describes it in the preface, ?the most decisive revolution in English history.? This vision can undoubtedly be inspirational, but it can also fail to take account of some of the complexities of the process, and some of the obvious continuities in parish religion despite the Reformation. It can also ascribe questionable symbolic importance to inanimate objects. The sources are all about material objects and their monetary value; the question of what those objects symbolized is fascinating, but must remain speculative. When royal injunctions stripped the churches of their ornamentation, for Duffy this was an assault upon the belief structures underlying that church decoration. Yet we cannot be sure that the statues and vestments had this much symbolic value for all the inhabitants of Morebath, any more than we can be sure that the new English Bible was not equally precious to them. The one thing we can be sure of, is that the monetary value of all these different items was carefully recorded and husbanded.

Duffy seems to take it for granted that the symbolic value of all these church ornaments was immense, and that the network of parish organization that helped to sustain the finances of the parish was about ?the construction of community.? This may indeed be true. It seems to have been the view of Sir Christopher, from the way in which he wrote the parish records; but can we be sure that his parishioners thought exactly the same way? The author has to conclude, reluctantly, that in fact his sources cannot tell us anything about the piety of the Morebath parishioners; they reveal only the facts of parish expenditure. The clear implication, however, is that for them, as for Duffy, the symbolism of these material objects was self-evident. The black vestments for requiem masses are described as if they were a physical manifestation of the Catholic doctrines concerning death and salvation. Duffy makes little distinction between monetary bequests to the images of the saints, and a belief in the intercessionary powers of those saints. But the reader is left wondering whether these connections would have been as clear to the parishioners as they were to their priest, or to the author telling their story. Were these parishioners demonstrating an impressive level of religious devotion, or were they merely following the usual custom?

There are strong suggestions that reactions to religious change were more complicated than straightforward Catholic loyalism. Reformation may have seemed like revolution to some, but clearly not to all. The dissolution of the monasteries, we are told, was a terrible shock to the populace. Yet although some religious houses, like the priory of St. Nicholas in Exeter, noted for its charity, were defended by the populace, the dissolution of Morebath?s more tight-fisted local monastery seems to have gone unlamented. The 1549 rebellion may have had strong religious overtones, but the Morebath records indicate how much it was also a protest at the financial exactions of the regime. The book gives a vivid impression of the economic problems of the time, without which the new Book of Common Prayer might not have been single-handedly capable of sparking rebellion. Rebellions cannot be reduced to single causes, as the author is keen to point out with reference to the traditionally more ?Protestant? disturbances in East Anglia. But Duffy cannot have it both ways: if, as he argues, the Protestantism of the East Anglian rebels may have been only skin-deep, adopted for political purposes and at the behest of rebel leaders, then the same may be true of the Catholic loyalism of the western rebels.

Furthermore, even if the loss of the old system of parish organization did indeed ?cut deep into the living tissue of Morebath?s communal life?, the evidence suggests that the wound may nonetheless have healed quite quickly. One reason that Duffy?s argument can at times seem a little overstated, is that he also provides so much evidence of how the village community adapted to change, redirecting its vitality through different channels. The parishioners who contributed the money for the parish?s Catholic devotions before the

Reformation were frequently the same people who were quite willing to pay for the acquisition of Protestant trappings after 1547 or 1558. We cannot be sure that they rated the value of the old above that of the new. When the Catholic vestments were kept secretly during Edward?s reign, it could perhaps be construed as a mark of devotion, a clinging to the old ways. But it could equally be construed in financial terms, as the prudent conservation of valuable articles by the parish that had paid for them. Undoubtedly Sir Christopher mourned the ?decay? in religion during Edward VI?s time, but we cannot be sure that his parishioners all thought as he did. ?All the voices of Morebath are one voice?, concludes Duffy, but it is a conclusion that can work two ways. We cannot be sure that the dominance of Sir Christopher?s voice indicates that it was representative of his parishioners: his voice may have just been the loudest. This is by no means to suggest that Duffy?s preferred interpretation is inaccurate: it remains extremely persuasive. Yet there are other possibilities to be explored.

This point is driven home by the central problem of conformity, particularly that of Sir Christopher Trychay himself. It is important to emphasize that this priest, who for much of the book is portrayed as a bastion of Catholic piety, nonetheless conformed for sixteen years under Elizabeth. Indeed, as Duffy points out, his conformity was ?more than a grudging minimalism?. He was noted, and presumably therefore accepted, by the Elizabethan visitation of 1561, as being a regular preacher. ?There is no easy accounting for it,? says Duffy. Yet much of the evidence deployed in this book suggests that there is an explanation. The parish, and its priest, had conformed to every single change brought in by the authorities over the course of four different reigns, with the single exception of the five men who joined the rebellion of 1549. Whatever his private judgement, Sir Christopher obeyed orders. The duty of obedience was as powerfully felt, perhaps, as more obviously religious obligations, and it may have been as pious in intent. And his duty of service to his parishioners may have had a moral weight which went above and beyond issues of Catholic or Protestant doctrine.

Obedience can be hard to interpret, a problem which has long frustrated Reformation historians, who find it so difficult to determine if a religious act is motivated by genuine piety or grudging compliance. The response of the Morebath parishioners to clerical exhortation also perhaps deserves closer consideration. If Morebath?s conformity to a Protestant regime may have been based on duty rather than genuine conviction, we ought at least to allow the possibility that so might earlier conformity to pre-Reformation religious expectations. The parishioners accepted the Elizabethan changes just as they had accepted Sir Christopher?s insistence in the 1520s that they subscribe to the fund for the black vestments. If their obedience after the Reformation was far from heartfelt, might their conformity in the 1520s not also have been a response to authority?

This book takes full account of the pressures brought to bear by higher authorities, but it could take a sterner line with Sir Christopher?s own authority in Morebath. In fact, the weight of clerical authority in general is perhaps not given the attention it merits, considering that elsewhere in the realm it provoked a level of anticlerical feeling which was an important contribution to the Reformation. The sources clearly demonstrate Sir Christopher?s dominant role in the village. The long-drawn out controversy in the 1530s over the payment of the parish clerk, who was appointed by Sir Christopher, and whose wages some in the parish refused to pay, might be held to hint at some resentment of the priest?s authority. This was, after all, a valuable post, one to which Sir Christopher was later to appoint his nephew and godson. In this, as in so many episodes, we see the priest directing affairs, recording his disapproval or satisfaction, applying pressure to his flock. It must remain questionable whether his parishioners followed his wishes out of devotion or constraint. This kind of clerical influence could be found too on the wider stage. During the 1549 ?Prayer-Book Rebellion?, the articles submitted by the rebels seemed to make a powerful case for the strength of popular Catholicism, and the widespread popular outrage at the break with tradition. Yet we cannot be sure that these articles truly reflected popular opinion, or whether the rebels? own motives were more complicated, given straightforward religious expression only because the articles were written by their priests. Duffy thinks that the Morebath men ?believed that they too were behaving like "honest good and godlie men" defending the traditions of their fathers and the well-being of their community?. We cannot be sure. It is tempting to identify people with their priest, not least because Sir Christopher as priest so

obviously identified with his people, but it is not the only possible interpretation.

Duffy?s argument could perhaps take more account of the likelihood that Morebath?s devotion to St. Sidwell may have been as much a question of obedience as its dutiful purchase of an English Bible. These carefully documented religious changes may thus have felt less like a revolution, therefore, and at points Duffy himself suggests as much. He allows that the piecemeal changes, dragged out over four decades, were not necessarily interpreted by the parishioners in terms of the larger confrontation between Protestantism and Catholicism which exercized governments and intellectuals. Looking at how the Elizabethan Settlement would have appeared to the parishioners of Morebath, Duffy notes a number of continuities that would presumably have made Elizabethan Protestantism easier to swallow than its Edwardian equivalent. The churching of women, the parish ales, and the rogation tide processions all continued, all important symbols as well as ceremonies. And clearly the fact that Sir Christopher was still officiating, albeit from a slightly different part of the church, must have lessened the sense of revolution. The symbolism of the ?stripping of the altars? may have been less significant than the symbolism of Sir Christopher?s continuing ministry.

This book is at its most successful as a chronicle of the small concerns of the parish. If it works slightly less well when it seeks to engage with certain wider debates, this is purely because the evidence is too slender to sustain any very broad conclusions. There is a useful modification to the arguments of Clive Burgess concerning the limitations of churchwardens? accounts as historical sources: the Morebath accounts certainly seem to suggest a rather different, more prosaic purpose than the more ostentatious records of big city churches. The contribution to the now very sophisticated debate concerning the 1549 rebellions is perforce delicate, but undoubtedly thought-provoking. The fact that Morebath acquired a cucking-stool in 1557, which was repaired in 1569 and remade in 1570, is too slight to contribute much to David Underdown?s arguments about a shift in gender relations. Duffy?s suggestion that women were perhaps treated better in an era where the Virgin and St. Sidwell were widely venerated is an interesting speculation, but it cannot go further than that.

As a contribution to the debate on the English Reformation, however, *The Voices of Morebath* is invaluable. The evidence deployed in this book is fascinating, and the central figure of Sir Christopher Trychay a great addition to the personalities which throng the sixteenth century. The source material is carefully and sensitively handled to produce a beautifully detailed understanding of the Reformation as it happened in one small parish. There perhaps remains some underlying tension between two different interpretations, between the emphasis on radical change and the evidence of obvious continuity. No doubt the English Reformation contained both, and in varying quantities according to which of the thousands of different parishes we examine. In the past Duffy has given most eloquent testimony of how the Reformation was a violation of all that the ordinary people held dear, and this is where *The Voices of Morebath* begins, with the Reformation as social revolution. But by the end of the book the suggestion is that ?the sharp distinctions between Catholic and Protestant, traditionalist and reformed, may look more straightforward and clear-cut to the historian than they did to those immersed in the press of events.? The evidence so painstakingly explored in this book suggests that there was a willingness to embrace change and a level of religious adaptability, in at least one English village, which we would do well not to underestimate. It almost appears as if some of the author?s own views have been gently reconfigured as the book progresses, even perhaps as Sir Christopher Trychay?s views were modified by fifty-four years of experience. It is in this exploration of the complexities of religious change that we find the greatest strengths of this book. The gradual readjustments in the intricate religious life of this one parish stand as a useful warning against adopting too straightforward an interpretation of the Reformation.

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