

Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England. Holding Their Peace*, Basingstoke 1998, Macmillan Press Ltd., pp. 258, glossary, select bibliography, index, series "Social History in Perspective".

In 1500, the decisive majority of the English was composed of good Catholics. In 1600, England was already a country of self-declared Protestants. The essence of the change to which English religiosity succumbed has attracted the attention of scholars for a long time, but no satisfactory explanation has been offered as yet. Older works (e.g. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, London 1964) described this process as an almost enthusiastic conversion of an overwhelming part of the nation. Newer studies (E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, New Haven 1992, or C. Haigh, *English Reformations*, Oxford 1993) place emphasis on state coercion and symptoms of the strong attachment of the people to traditional religious forms. In the presented book, Christopher Marsh embarked upon an attempt at conciliating those contradictory views by examining doctrinal changes through the prism of social history. The basic motif is a search for the level of an equilibrium between changes and continuation, which permitted a relatively conflict-less and effective transformation of the religiosity of the widest strata of English society during the sixteenth century.

It would appear that the chasm between late mediaeval and Protestant religiosity calls for a description of an evolutionary change of one into the other, and that it would be difficult to speak about any sort of concrete English sixteenth-century religiosity, but rather about two different phenomena and their mutual permeation. Nonetheless, Christopher Marsh finds a certain basic level of a continuum in the popular comprehension of religion, to which he ascribes an outright essential significance for understanding the assimilation of Protestantism by English society. The *meritum* of this attitude was composed of a striving at the retention of social harmony at the local level, with the assistance of religiously motivated charity, the principles of good neighbourliness, and the preservation of a shared hierarchy of moral principles in daily life.

The author seeks evidence in favour of his thesis in a wide spectre of the behaviour of the English people, associated with religion, which he groups in three spheres of activity, in accordance with the attitude towards the official Church (Catholic or Protestant, depending on external conditions).

In the chapter entitled *Lay Folk within the Church* (pp. 27–95) Christopher Marsh discusses the fundamental domain of the religious activity of the faithful

within the Church. In a presentation of the role played by the parish church in everyday life he draws attention to the fact that Reformation transformations did not sever geographic or personal bonds with a concrete site of the cult. The unbroken continuum of the parish and diocesan division was retained; to a considerable extent, the same holds true for the composition of the local clergy. The majority of the posts of the secular elected parish officials, such as the churchwardens, also remained unaltered.

Fundamental doctrinal changes affecting the liturgy did not encounter significant resistance, possibly because they did not undermine excessively the social role of Church rites. This was the case, for example, with the Christian *rites de passage* (such as baptism, marriage and burial). Despite the fact that some were rejected, and the meaning of others was changed completely, their ritual and community functions were not subjected to deprecation, and found their own niche in the new Protestant rites. Certain liturgical novelties easily became popular — e.g. the replacement of Latin with English or group singing of the psalms.

On the other hand, the abolished customs were partially compensated. By way of example, the order in which members of the congregation participated during processions, which reflected the social hierarchy of the parish, found an analogy in the arrangement of pews, which appeared in English churches on a mass scale precisely during the second half of the sixteenth century.

Changes in the outfitting of church interiors, ordained from above, which could be regarded as most painful by traditionalists attached to iconographic religious expression, were alleviated by inertia at the parish level. Obviously, the directives were heeded, but without the undue haste and eagerness which could affect adversely the feeling of participation in a religious community.

This is not to say that the people perceived Elizabethan Protestantism as Catholicism merely cleansed from its abuses. Essentially, the transformation was fundamental, even at the most elementary level observed by the simple folk. Nonetheless, the continuum of certain elements, especially those associated with religious social life, comprised an extremely important aid for the taming and acceptance of new religious reality.

The chapter *Layfolk alongside the Church* (pp. 96–154) discusses multiple problems described as the extra-Church religious expression of the faithful. The author considers, i. a. the reasons for the decline during the Late Middle Ages of the non-liturgical annual holidays and community ceremonies. He sees the causes of their disappearance not only in the pressure exerted by the reformers and the liquidation of the brotherhoods which organised such events, but also in a relative pauperisation of English society during the sixteenth century and the rise of the policing role of state administration.

Transformations of the religious forms of participation are treated in a slightly less convincing manner. The analogies suggested by the author between Catholic pilgrims and Protestant “gadders”, who embarked upon group journeys in search of spiritually stimulating sermons, are acceptable, but a comparison of late mediaeval fraternities with exclusive circles of Elizabethan-era puritans is rather far-fetched.

On the other hand, the author's opinion about the activity of Church courts which survived the Reformation, England being probably the only European Protestant country where such a feat proved to be possible, appears to be particularly interesting. Emphasis is placed frequently on the role of such courts in the improvement of the sexual mores and religious discipline of the English at the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Christopher Marsh draws attention to the fact that the mode of their functioning ascribed particular significance to a popular feeling of morality and justice. The diocesan prosecutors based themselves on information provided by churchwardens chosen by local communities. An analysis of the practice of Church courts indicates that, from the point of view of the parish, they comprised a permanent

and authoritative auxiliary tool used for the retention of social harmony during a turbulent period.

Material for reflections about the balance between continuum and change was provided also by analyses of testament creeds and charity bequeaths, as well as popular publications on religious themes.

The problem of magic, spells and wondrous events simply had to appear in the book under examination. The author represents the stand that the Reformation severed bonds between religion and magic. An accelerated erosion of folk superstition led to chaos in the world of supernatural imagery, a process which, in turn, became one of the reasons for witch hunts (which in England remained rather moderate in comparison with Scotland or Germany). The significance of magic was seriously curtailed. Quite possibly, Protestant piety satisfied the popular need for the spectacular and the magical by the rather universal doctrine of Providence, whose popular version concentrated on a willing deciphering of divine signs in unusual events.

The chapter on *Laufock beyond the Church* (pp. 155–196) concerns all those people who sought spiritual fulfillment outside the official Church. During the Catholic period they included the Lollards and early Protestants, and in Reformation-era England — assorted separatists (Anabaptists, Brownists, the Family of Love) and the Catholics. The author describes briefly the number of those groups, their geographic distribution in England, social and gender composition as well as the bases of their doctrines and manner of behaviour and conduct in relation to the rest of society. He also focuses on the fact that the sects fulfilled the need for fellowship to a greater degree than the official Church. Furthermore, they attracted people of higher religious involvement (this pertains even to Elizabethan Catholics). Nonetheless, taking into account the marginal range of the sects, it should be noted that the decisive majority of people was sufficiently satisfied with participation in the official cult, even if it changed as frequently as was the case in the middle of the century. Obviously, a prime role could have been played by coercion and intimidation, but apparently the transformations did not alienate the average Englishman from the official Church to a degree sufficient for him to take radical steps, despite the fact that religious issues awaken heroic-martyrdom attitudes rather easily.

Mutual relations between the English dissidents and the religious majority also provide interesting information about popular religiosity. Naturally, both groups remained mutually hostile and tried to isolate themselves, but it is possible to notice in sixteenth-century England a certain tolerance towards distinctness; albeit not articulated and rather fragile, it was sufficient for the attainment of a certain *modus convivendi* at a local level. The key to its comprehension is to be found in the results of studies demonstrating that dissident families were much less mobile than the remaining Englishmen during the sixteenth century. By remaining a constant element of a regional community, they were subjected to principles of good neighbourly ethics, even if they broke religious ties with their neighbours. This fact indicates that in English popular religiosity of the period under examination the Christian principle of local social harmony towered over the awareness of religious differences.

In the closing chapter: *Conclusions: The Compliance Conundrum* (pp. 197–219) the author refers to a recently popular scheme of perceiving the triumph of the English Reformation as a success of conformism and subordination (cf. R. Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People*, Cambridge 1989). Nonetheless, he draws attention to positive premises of this type of behaviour of the major part of English society. Concessions in the domain of religion were the outcome not so much of fear, comfort or indifference. Adaptation to the behaviour of others in itself comprises a religious principle associated with a popular striving at retaining social harmony and an ensuing state of grace. Furthermore, it harmonised with the ethical and community-oriented character of the liturgy.

On the other hand, obedience towards authority, both royal and parochial, was one of the basic deeply embedded duties of the sixteenth-century man. Naturally, there were certain limits to such obedience, and sometimes conflicts flared. Nonetheless, if state and Church leaders were capable of granting their orders a moderate nature and did not apply grievous coercion, then the ensuing conditions made it possible to perform even basic changes. Such a policy, in the opinion of the author, was pursued by the majority of sixteenth-century English reformers.

The confession transformation cannot be regarded only from the viewpoint of ways for overcoming conservative habits. Certain proposals made by the Reformation, such as the use of the English language in liturgy, communion in both kinds, the reduction of the role of the clergy, etc., could have appeared highly attractive or, at any rate, not repellent to the simple folk. Moreover, the attitude of the people towards religious changes was moulded by fleeting emotions, which are difficult to capture in sources. As a rule, a considerable role is ascribed to negative feelings, such as fear and animosity, forgetting that they could have been accompanied by positive emotions: curiosity, excitement or a proclivity towards novelties.

The author proposes a decisively positive assessment of popular religiosity in sixteenth-century England. True, the English people did not need or want the Reformation, but they accepted it, took an active part in its shaping, and adapted it in such a manner that the new creed satisfied the most fundamental spiritual needs. At the same time, social harmony was retained, generally speaking. Such an image appears to be slightly too idyllic, a feature which should be ascribed to the author's zeal in a polemic with pessimistic visions of the religious history of England during the sixteenth century.

The conception of English popular religiosity, as portrayed by Christopher Marsh, remains well devised and convincingly presented, despite the fact that the description of the equilibrium between continuum and change places slightly greater emphasis on the former. Symptoms of continuation in the religious behaviour of the English prior to and in the wake of the Reformation, collected by the author, possess great value as proof. The overall positive impression is spoilt, however, by unnecessary references to dubitable questions, such as the search for a continuum of the sacrament of confession in the popularity of spiritual diaries (which, as the author himself admits, were extremely limited); the same holds true for a repetition of the view launched by Patricia Crawford (*Women and Religion in England 1500-1720*, London-New York 1993), maintaining that the role of the wife in the Protestant household partially compensated the lost inspiring model of the Virgin Mary, an opinion which the author does not comment.

It is worth stressing that Christopher Marsh succeeded in applying his theory for the purposes of interpreting extremely divergent symptoms of popular religiosity: from liturgy to astrology, and from the outfitting of churches to interpersonal relations. The more surprising, therefore, is the almost total omission of the enormous part played in religious life by monasteries (especially in towns) during the pre-Reformation period. All transformations in this domain must have been particularly significant, and it would be interesting for the reader to become acquainted with the author's interpretation.

The fact that the author concentrated his attention on the social aspect of popular religiosity also gives rise to certain critical remarks. Such accusations, however, would be incorrect if we were to take into consideration the specificity of historical sources for research concerning social groups which, for all practical purposes, were illiterate. More, the approach towards this particular problem, preferred by the author, enabled him to operate with concrete facts and to avoid excessive theorisation. As a result, the book can be described as a highly successful historical monographic study.

Finally, the literary merits of the reviewed publication also deserve mention. The book is written in a highly engaging manner, and the colourful and lively style is embellished with astonishing metaphors and carefully chosen source-material quotations. All those elements render the presentation additionally attractive, without impairing its clarity.

*Tomasz Wiślicz*