

THE CHURCH IN AN
AGE OF DANGER

Parsons and Parishioners, 1660–1740

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Introduction

I am always very well pleased with a Country Sunday.

This book will consider the practice and social context of established religion in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. In its detailed description of worship in the parish of Sir Roger de Coverley, *The Spectator* provides one picture of the manner in which the social relations between the elites, the clergy and the people were expressed through religion. The fictional Tory squire took pains to encourage his villagers and tenants to worship in the parish church in a suitably decent and conformable manner. Sir Roger gave each member of the congregation a Prayer Book and a hassock so that they could kneel and join in the responses. He railed the altar and had religious texts written on the walls, encouraged psalmody, rewarded with a Bible those children who performed their catechism well, and provided the parson with a supply of printed sermons to read in church. Sir Roger also took care to keep the congregation in good order, interrupting the service to chide malefactors, and standing up during prayers to check that his tenants were all present. In his support for the liturgy and scripture, for seemly worship and the edification of the catechism, Sir Roger de Coverley represented one ideal of worship within the eighteenth-century Church of England.¹

Coverley parish exemplifies the dependency, or social control, thesis, according to which the landed elites and the clergy were united in an alliance which was to their mutual interest. In return for the Church's support of the social and political establishment, the landed gentry defended the worship and privileges of the Church of England. This interpretation, which informs the work of historians as far apart ideologically as E. P. Thompson and J. C. D. Clark, remains the orthodox view of the relations between church and society in eighteenth-century England.² Religion is thought to have been generally under the control of the

¹ *The Spectator*, no. 112, 9 July 1711.

² H. J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780–1880* (London, 1969), pp. 33–7; A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740–1914* (London, 1976), pp. 13–14, 97–110; J. Rule, *Albion's People: English Society, 1714–1815*

squire. Thompson describes the Church as one link (albeit a weak one) in the chains which bound the common people. Since, in his view, the cultural relationship between patricians and plebeians was based upon a fundamental antagonism, anticlericalism represented a form of social protest.³ Clark gives the Established Church a far greater role in the 'confessional state' in which the Church was at the very least an equal partner with the Crown and the aristocracy. The ideological underpinnings provided by the Anglican Church, he argues, were crucial to the continued dominance of the landed aristocracy and gentry throughout the eighteenth century.⁴

The dependency thesis fuses two dichotomies which historians have developed in order to help them understand the social significance of culture in early modern England: one between popular and elite culture, and another between popular and official religion. Although parallel, these dichotomies are nevertheless distinct.⁵ Proponents of the binary model of popular and elite culture argue that the two became increasingly polarised during the early modern period.⁶ The elites not only withdrew from popular culture but they also sought to suppress its rituals and festivals. The seventeenth-century campaign of the godly against the recreations and good fellowship of their neighbours was one aspect of this cultural war.⁷ The two-tiered model has been the subject of extensive criticism on at least two grounds.⁸ First, the division of society into only two categories – elite and people – oversimplifies the complexities of the structure of society and raises questions about how each should be defined. E. P. Thompson's elite is different from that of Keith Wrightson, for example. One corrective has been the suggestion that the middling sort, including tradesmen

footnote 2 (*cont.*)

(London, 1992), pp. 35–6. Some authors are vague about which part of the eighteenth century they are describing. Cf. G. F. A. Best, *Temporal Pillars: Queen Anne's Bounty, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and the Church of England* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 77, who dates the height of the alliance between squire and parson from c. 1780 to 1832.

³ E. P. Thompson, 'Patrician society, plebeian culture', *Journal of Social History* 7 (Summer 1974): 382–405.

⁴ J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁵ For a discussion of the meanings of popular religion, see M. Venard, 'Popular religion in the eighteenth century', in W. J. Callahan and D. Higgs, eds. *Church and Society in Catholic Europe of the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 138–54, esp. 138–9.

⁶ P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978).

⁷ K. Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (London, 1979); K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London, 1980); D. E. Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985), ch. 3. Cf. M. Spufford, 'Puritanism and social control?', in A. J. Fletcher and J. Stevenson, eds., *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 41–57.

⁸ B. Reay, *Popular Cultures in England 1550–1750* (London, 1998), esp. ch. 7; T. Harris, ed., *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500–1850* (London, 1995), ch. 1. Martin Ingram was one of the earliest critics of the Wrightson–Levine thesis. 'Religion, communities and moral discipline in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England: case studies', in K. von Greyerz, ed., *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500–1850* (London, 1984), pp. 177–91.

and substantial farmers, should be regarded as a separate category. This has the advantage of recognising the significant role that the middling sort played in local administration and prosecution. Yet it does little to remedy the second objection to the model, its emphasis upon cultural conflict rather than consensus. Critics have instead emphasised the extent to which different groups in society shared cultural phenomena and redefined them in their own terms. Rather than debating the validity of the two-tiered model, it seems more productive to explore cultural interactions between the people and the elite.⁹ As we shall see, religion was also a focus of negotiation between different social groups and cannot be viewed merely in terms of polarisation or the enforcement of elite hegemony.

The dichotomy between popular and official religion has been more persistent.¹⁰ A recent synthesis, while recognising the range of religious views, has restated this opposition by describing the religion of the majority of the population in terms of Pelagianism and folklorised Christianity.¹¹ Historians have found it difficult to believe that the Church of England could have exemplified popular religion, a view which the debate over the popularity of the sixteenth-century Reformation has appeared to validate. Revisionists have argued that Protestantism led to the dissociation of the people from official religion, so that a popular religion informed by residual elements of Catholicism existed outside the Church.¹² Yet this interpretation can be questioned on several counts. First, it views lay religious practice through the eyes of contemporary critics, including both evangelical Protestants and other clergy, and therefore accepts their post-Reformation value judgements. Each imposed a Manichaean framework upon the world, praising those who conformed to their own high standards of behaviour, while condemning everyone else. Indeed, this binary opposition between sheep and goats, elect and reprobate, is fundamental to Christianity.¹³ The puritans merely took the dichotomy to extremes in their belief that it might be possible to identify the small number who were elect on this earth. The truly godly were indeed a minority in the early seventeenth century, but this does not mean that all those with religious commitment were. In the late seventeenth century, complaints from clergymen about the irreligious behaviour of their congregations have a familiar air and are no more reliable.¹⁴

⁹ P. Burke, 'Popular culture reconsidered', *Storia della storia grafica* 17 (1990): 40–9.

¹⁰ Exceptions include M. Ingram, 'From reformation to toleration: popular religious cultures in England, 1540–1690', in Harris, *Popular Culture*, pp. 95–123; and D. Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750–1900* (London, 1996), pp. 70–1.

¹¹ Reay, *Popular Cultures*, p. 100. See also K. V. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971); D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death* (Oxford, 1997).

¹² C. Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), esp. Introduction, ch. 1; E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London, 1992). Cf. A. D. Brown, *Popular Piety in Late Medieval England: The Diocese of Salisbury 1250–1550* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 10. See also J. Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 271–4.

¹³ Matthew 25. ¹⁴ See chapter 8.

A second reason for questioning the dissociation of popular from official religion is that there is growing evidence of popular support for the Church of England before, during and after the Civil Wars. This evidence suggests heartfelt support for the Prayer Book and the clergy from a broad spectrum of groups in society.¹⁵ By the early seventeenth century, many parishioners had accepted the Anglican liturgy and defined religious worship in terms of its rites and ceremonies. The strength of support for a church is often best demonstrated by its persistence during times of persecution. During the Civil Wars and Interregnum, the Prayer Book continued to be used in some parishes even though it had been proscribed by Parliament. A small proportion of parishes also continued to celebrate communions at feasts such as Easter, although this practice was discouraged.¹⁶ The survival of these practices, although limited, compares favourably with the rapid response of parishes to the twists and turns of central ecclesiastical policy in the middle of the sixteenth century.¹⁷ The efficiency of the enforcement of the Reformation and the Marian reaction and the chaos of the Interregnum no doubt explain some of the differences, but clear evidence of support for the Prayer Book remains, nevertheless. This support was reaffirmed by the rapid return to communion at festivals in 1659 and particularly in 1660. When ecclesiastical visitations began again in 1662, parishes moved rapidly to remedy faults left by fifteen years of enforced neglect.¹⁸

Recent research has employed innovative approaches to uncover further evidence for the vitality of a popular religious culture which incorporated elements of Protestant belief and practice. Tessa Watt's study of cheaply printed broadsides and chapbooks looks outside the church to the streets where ballads were sold, into houses, and even on the walls of alehouses. She finds that conservative and reformed themes were often fused in the extensive religious literature that continued to predominate in the years from 1550 to 1640.¹⁹ Ronald Hutton's study of the ritual year returns attention to the church by focusing on its use of financial resources. His analysis of churchwardens' accounts shows how both religious and secular festive years were reformed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the Revolution and Interregnum had seen the temporary triumph of the long campaign of Protestant reformers against the religious and secular festive calendar, a flourishing festive culture after the Restoration

¹⁵ J. Maltby, '“By this book”: parishioners, the Prayer Book and the Established Church', in K. Fincham, ed., *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642* (London, 1993), pp. 115–37; J. Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1998).

¹⁶ J. Morrill, 'The Church in England in the 1640s', in J. Morrill, ed., *Reactions to the English Civil War 1642–1649* (London and Basingstoke, 1982); R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), p. 214.

¹⁷ Hutton, *Rise and Fall of Merry England*, pp. 69–110; Hutton, 'The local impact of the Tudor Reformations', in C. Haigh, ed., *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 114–38.

¹⁸ See chapter 3.

¹⁹ T. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 126.

demonstrated the Church's 'capacity for local choice and innovation', a sign of vigour and lay support.²⁰ There is little evidence that the Reformation created a dissociation of popular from official religion. The religious culture of the majority of the population could not help being influenced by the Reformation as new patterns of worship emerged and became familiar. Popular religion, in other words, was not static but evolved to meet new circumstances, incorporating elements of official religion in the process, although not necessarily in a form which the Church would have recognised.

Watt finds little in pre-Civil War cheap print 'about double predestination, ecclesiastical vestments, the position of the altar, or the prerequisites for communion', although she notes that these needs may have been met elsewhere.²¹ Her findings suggest that the dissociation thesis may also be criticised for placing too much weight upon the search for popular support for particular theological positions and ceremonial practices such as the sacrament of grace or doctrine of purgatory. In practice, the majority of the people had little interest in the theological debates which occupied some of the more highly educated members of the population. In this sense, at least, the dichotomy between official and popular religion is valid, but it tells us little about the religion of the people. The ambiguities within the Thirty-Nine Articles and the liturgy must, in any case, have made it difficult for many people to understand the Church's doctrinal stance. The Church's lack of doctrinal cohesion after the Restoration gave communal participation in common prayer particular importance to Anglicans.²²

In studying the religion of the people, it is necessary to distinguish between religious belief, knowledge, experience, practice and secular impact.²³ Because these various aspects of religion are interrelated, it is natural to assume that they operate in parallel, so that one may serve as an indicator for the others. The scarcity of available evidence makes such an approach particularly attractive. Religious practice is often easier to study than belief, knowledge or experience. Yet some faiths vest greater importance in certain aspects of religion than in others. One consequence of the Reformation was to give particular emphasis to belief, through the doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and salvation by faith, and to personal piety within the family. This does not mean that this shift in emphasis was universally, or even generally, accepted. For many people, participation in church services and activities remained the single most

²⁰ Hutton, *Rise and Fall of Merry England*, *passim* (quoting p. 248).

²¹ Watt, *Cheap Print*, p. 8.

²² J. Spurr, *The Restoration Church of England, 1646–1689* (New Haven, 1991), ch. 7.

²³ R. Stark and C. Glock, *American Piety: The Study of Religious Commitment* (Berkeley, 1968), ch. 1. A similar distinction is made by C. J. Sommerville between meanings of secularisation. See 'The destruction of religious culture in pre-industrial England', *Journal of Religious History* 15 (1988): 76–93; and *The Secularization of Early Modern England* (New York and Oxford, 1992), p. 5. In portraying 'the sense of separation of almost all aspects of life and thought from religious associations or ecclesiastical direction' (*ibid.*, p. 1), Sommerville presents an alternative formulation of an interpretation based on dissociation.

important focus for religious experience, as well as providing a forum for social relationships.

This study will investigate the social significance of religion through popular involvement in institutional religion, exploring the extent to which people were committed to the Established Church, the quality of their relations with the clergy, and the role of religion as a focus for social relationships. Historians have tended to emphasise the importance of voluntary religion from the seventeenth century onwards and the emergence of organised dissent after 1662. The confirmation of its status in 1689 may appear to confirm this interpretation.²⁴ Yet in sketching the evolution of the English separatist tradition, there is a danger of writing the past in terms of later developments. Dissent was created by the political and religious establishment. Relatively few people set out deliberately to separate themselves from the Church. One reason why it is so difficult to agree about the definition of 'puritans' is that they constituted a significant section of the national church, which most people found it unthinkable to leave.²⁵ Richard Baxter agreed that so-called 'conventicles' should be viewed 'not as a separated Church but as a part of the Church more diligent than the rest'.²⁶ Even after the Restoration, the great majority of parishioners wished to remain within the Church. Thus the religious census of 1676, which enumerated stubborn nonconformists, found that only a minority of the population fitted into the category. Lay officers proved reluctant to prosecute neighbours who attended conventicles or consistently stayed away from church.²⁷ The unpopularity of informers under the second Conventicle Act is partly explained by the fact that their net might ensnare those who attended both church and a conventicle as well as separatists. The religious societies, first formed in the 1670s, followed in the 1690s by the SPCK and later by the Methodists for many years, demonstrated the same determination to remain within the Church.²⁸ In short, while voluntarism was a minority instinct, the desire to remain a member of a unified church remained strong for most people, and was stronger than concern about ceremonial details or remote doctrinal debates. Indeed, this belief in the value of universal membership of one unified church was a feature of religious culture that members of all social groups shared.²⁹

²⁴ C. Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, 2nd edn (New York, 1967), ch. 14. For an enlightening exploration of this theme, see P. Collinson, 'The English conventicle', in W. J. Sheils and D. Wood, eds., *Voluntary Religion*, Ecclesiastical History Society 23 (Oxford, 1986), pp. 223–59. See also Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, pp. 138–42; E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (London, 1931), vol. I, esp. pp. 656–71; M. Weber, 'The protestant sects and the spirit of capitalism', pp. 302–22, in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, trans. and eds., *From Max Weber* (London, 1991), pp. 313–22.

²⁵ K. Fincham, eds., *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642* (London, 1993); C. Durston and J. Eales, eds., *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700* (London, 1996); J. Spurr, *English Puritanism* (Basingstoke, 1998). ²⁶ Collinson, 'The English conventicle', p. 223. ²⁷ See chapter 7.

²⁸ J. Walsh, 'Religious societies: Methodist and evangelical 1738–1800', pp. 279–302, in Sheils and Wood, *Voluntary Religion*.

²⁹ Spurr, *Restoration Church*, ch. 3; Conrad Russell, 'Arguments for religious unity in England, 1530–1650', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (Oct. 1967): 201–26.

Parishioners expressed their commitment to membership in the Church by participating in its weekly public assemblies each Sunday and in the communal rites of baptism, marriage and burial. It may be objected that they had little choice because their observance of these offices was enforced by law and therefore was not voluntary. Until 1689 persistent absence from church could lead to prosecution and punishment by a fine. Yet it seems unlikely that for over a century the majority of the population attended church solely because they were compelled to do so. The best evidence for commitment to the services of the Church is that the laity complained when clerical neglect meant that services either were not performed or were inadequate.³⁰ When they were given an opportunity to contribute actively, for example by singing psalms, they did so eagerly.³¹ The penal laws also present a practical difficulty, because the correctional courts which provide the best window into religious observance were heavily involved in the prosecution of nonconformists. Not everyone who appeared before the church courts or who quarrelled with their minister was a nonconformist.³²

Worship in church had spiritual and social significance. By attending services, parishioners affirmed their membership of both the national church and the local community.³³ Interpretations which emphasise enforcement and social control understate the extent to which all members of the parish participated in institutional religion. This is not to say that the Church of England defined all popular beliefs. Popular religion constituted a blend of official and unofficial beliefs, which differed from individual to individual. A folklorised and magical world view lived alongside Anglicanism, while other ritual practices lost their religious connotations.³⁴ The church was a focus for social relationships. In the layout of its pews, the church replicated the hierarchical structure of society. Yet the parish church touched all sections of society. Every inhabitant, ratepayer and tithe payer had an interest in the provision of prayers and in the good government of the parish. Religion provided an important focus for negotiation between different groups in society. While it could be a force for division, it also had the potential to represent a shared culture that mediated relationships between members of different groups in society. The relationship between the parson, who was the local representative of the national church, and his congregation was particularly important.

A final reason to question the view that the sixteenth-century Reformation alienated the people from official religion is that another set of historians has identified the latter half of the eighteenth century as the crucial period when the

³⁰ Chapter 5. ³¹ Chapter 10. ³² Cf. Reay, *Popular Cultures*, p. 99, n. 107.

³³ M. Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society: Oldham and Saddleworth 1740–1865* (Oxford, 1994), p. 260.

³⁴ Reay, *Popular Cultures*, ch. 3; Ronald Hutton, 'The English Reformation and the evidence of folklore', *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 89–116; Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, ch. 6.

Church suffered a devastating loss of grass-roots support.³⁵ Alan Gilbert describes the period from 1740 to 1800 as one of ‘prolonged, rapid, and disastrous’ decline for the Church of England.³⁶ The number of communicants in selected Oxfordshire parishes fell by 25 per cent between 1738 and 1802. In the north they fell by almost 18 per cent in only twenty years. By 1851, the Church of England accounted for a minority of worshippers in most places, and even in Anglican bastions such as the county of Wiltshire it accounted for little more than half of those attending religious services.³⁷ Students of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Church have long been divided between optimists and pessimists.³⁸ The pessimistic school follows earlier reformers who viewed the eighteenth century as one of the blackest ages of church history. The Church could not avoid the stain of ‘Old Corruption’, and the political alliance between the Whig regime and the bishops made the latter appear to be little better than placemen. At the local level, a pluralist clergy who appeared more interested in the hunt than the pulpit must inevitably have neglected their pastoral duties. John Wesley summed up the criticisms against the Church and its clergy, ‘those indolent, pleasure taking, money-loving, praise-loving, preferment-seeking Clergymen’ who were ‘a stink in the nostrils of God’.³⁹ His words echoed the critique of the Whig bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury half a century earlier. Complaining that the clergy were greedy and lax and that the church courts were corrupt, Burnet judged that the spirit of religion was ‘sunk and dead’.⁴⁰ Because the eighteenth-century Church was ‘a static institution, characterised by inertia’, it proved unable to cope with the rapid demographic growth and urbanisation that occurred later in the century, for these changes had their greatest impact in the industrialising north where it was least able to respond.⁴¹ The Church of England also suffered a decline in popular support in the south, as the clergy

³⁵ Hutton observes a parallel phenomenon in studies of popular culture. *Rise and Fall of Merry England*, p. 227. ³⁶ Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p. 29.

³⁷ R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 22–3; Summary of Census of Religious Worship (1851), Table N; W. S. F. Pickering, ‘The 1851 religious census – a useless experiment?’, *British Journal of Sociology* 18 (1967): 396 (Map 1), 399 (Map 2). These figures are for the number of persons present at the most numerous service in each church or chapel. It is impossible to recover the total number of individuals who attended church on census Sunday, because of the danger of double-counting. See Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society*, pp. 250–2, and the references cited there, for a discussion of the census’s limitations.

³⁸ The debate is summarised by K. Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*, vol. II: 1689–1833 (London, 1997), pp. xiii–xv; J. Walsh and S. Taylor, ‘Introduction: the Church and Anglicanism in the “long” eighteenth century’, in J. Walsh, C. Hayden and S. Taylor, eds., *The Church of England, c.1689–c.1833: From Toleration to Tractarianism* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 1–64, esp. pp. 1–3; C. G. Brown, ‘Did urbanization secularize Britain?’, *Urban History Yearbook* (1988): 1–14, esp. 1–6.

³⁹ Quoted in Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, p. 83. See also Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, pp. 94–7.

⁴⁰ Burnet, *Pastoral Care*, pp. xxvi–xxvii, 117, 159; Foxcroft, pp. 329–31, quoting p. 330.

⁴¹ Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, pp. 28, 76–81, 94–115. But cf. Brown, ‘Urbanization’, pp. 1–6, 11.

consolidated their alliance with landed gentry and grew more distant from their congregations. The clergy became more prosperous, self-confident and powerful, changes that were matched by the growth in pluralism and clerical magistracy.⁴²

Other historians have cast the eighteenth-century Church in a more favourable light. Norman Sykes long provided the dominant account, based upon qualified optimism.⁴³ Sykes countered the view that the bishops were political creatures by demonstrating that they diligently performed their pastoral duties, particularly those of confirmation and the examination of candidates for the clergy. While he was not blind to the defects of the Church, he observed that many of its problems were not new. The eighteenth-century Church had many obstacles to overcome, including economic and institutional defects, many of which dated back to before the English Civil War, if not to before the Reformation.⁴⁴ More recently, historians have taken an even more optimistic stance. It has been suggested that the Church 'in the first half of the eighteenth century perhaps reached the zenith of its allegiance among the population'.⁴⁵ The use of religious patronage for political purposes appears to have been neither as pernicious nor as effective as had been thought. Historians have also found considerable potential for pastoral care and lay piety in the late eighteenth century and have stressed the vitality of local Anglicanism, even in industrialising communities such as Oldham and Saddleworth, although this depended upon local initiatives and must be set in the context of the considerable success of aggressive evangelical churches.⁴⁶

Although recent research suggests that the Church of England coped better than had previously been thought, it nevertheless lost ground, at least relative to other churches, during the eighteenth century. Why did it suffer this erosion of support? Structural, pastoral and economic factors played a part, as did competition from the evangelical churches. Yet it will be argued in this book that the key to the decline of the Church lies in the nature of relationships between the people and the clergy. Its origins can be found in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in the period between the Restoration and the birth of

⁴² Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, pp. 80–1; P. Virgin, *The Church in an Age of Negligence: Ecclesiastical Structure and Problems of Church Reform 1700–1840* (Cambridge, 1989), *passim*; E. J. Evans, 'Some reasons for the growth of English rural anti-clericalism c. 1750–c.1830', *Past and Present* 66 (Feb. 1975): 84–109; Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *The Church of England*, p. 28.

⁴³ N. Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIIIth Century* (Cambridge, 1934).

⁴⁴ C. Hill, *The Economic Problems of the Church* (Oxford, 1956); Brown, *Popular Piety*, pp. 70–4.

⁴⁵ W. M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 19. See also T. Isaacs, 'The Anglican hierarchy and the reformation of manners 1688–1738', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 33 (1982): 391–411.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Religion in Industrial Society*, *passim*, esp. ch. 2; M. Smith, 'The reception of Richard Podmore: Anglicanism in Saddleworth 1700–1830', in Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *The Church of England*, pp. 110–23; D. R. Hirschberg, 'The government and church patronage in England, 1660–1760', *Journal of British Studies* 20 (1980): 109–39; S. Taylor, 'Church and state in England in the mid-eighteenth century: the Newcastle years 1742–1762' (unpublished Ph.D., Cambridge University, 1987). I am grateful to Dr Taylor for providing me with a copy of his thesis.

Methodism. It was in these years that the Church and its clergy revealed the rigidity of mind and the isolation from the laity that made them increasingly unable to command popular affection. The clergy did much to overcome the pastoral problems that confronted them. The early eighteenth century witnessed an Anglican revival that revealed the remarkable potential of the Church to provide the religion of the people. Yet the Church was ultimately unable to retain popular support because it was unwilling to relinquish any control over worship to the laity. Its problems were more psychological than structural. Indeed, its institutional defects reflected a clerical mindset that was defensive and inflexible. The Church repeatedly showed itself unable to change to meet circumstances. The parochial reforms of the Commonwealth were discarded. The liturgical changes that would have allowed presbyterians to be comprehended were discarded. For much of the period from 1660 to 1740 the Church was distracted by the threat from dissent. The quarrel between High and Low Church that came to a head in the reign of Queen Anne prevented the Church from confronting the real problems it faced, while making it many enemies. The SPCK, which initially sought to involve both High and Low Churchmen, became the target of accusations of Jacobitism. The greatest danger to the Church came not from without but from within. The clergy turned inwards, defining themselves as a distinct profession, determined to protect the liturgy and the monopoly over it which their unique sacerdotal status gave them.⁴⁷ The closed mind of the Anglican clergy can be seen in the reaction to Methodism, initially a movement within the Church. The clergy disliked the impropriety of religious meetings held in the open, the singing and the greater involvement of the laity.⁴⁸ Clerical inability to understand or accept popular worship meant that clerical complaints about religious ignorance cannot be relied upon as evidence of popular beliefs.

There are good reasons for starting this study in 1660, even though there undoubtedly were continuities between religion and politics under the early and later Stuarts.⁴⁹ The Restoration of the Church of England alongside the Stuart monarchy provided it with the opportunity for a fresh start. After years of disorder, the restored Church was initially popular. Dissent created a new set of problems, but these were more institutional than theological, and puritanism no longer represented a serious threat within the Church. The end point in around 1740 is more controversial. The years 1688–1714 represent a continental divide which historians are reluctant to cross.⁵⁰ It is true that 1689 marked the end of

⁴⁷ See chapter 2. ⁴⁸ Hempton, *The Religion of the People*, pp. 149–50.

⁴⁹ M. G. Finlayson, *Historians, Puritanism and the English Revolution: The Religious Factor in English Politics before and after the Interregnum* (Toronto and London, 1983); T. Harris, et al., eds., *The Politics of Religion in Restoration England* (Oxford, 1990).

⁵⁰ Many of the books cited in this chapter either stop or start in the period 1688–1714, mostly 1688, e.g. Clark; Walsh, Haydon and Taylor; Wrightson and Levine; Spurr; Hylson-Smith; Virgin; Rule. Champion, Gilbert and Smith are notable exceptions.

the Church of England's legal monopoly over religious worship. Yet the Act of Toleration did not stimulate an expansion of dissent, even though some clergymen complained that it served as a licence for non-attendance at either church or chapel. To conservative nineteenth-century commentators the psychological and ideological significance of the fracturing of the Church caused by the departure of non-jurors was enormous, and it is no coincidence that they decried the state of the Church after 1700 while praising the Restoration Church. Yet the numerical impact of the non-jurors was minuscule and had little effect upon the religious practice of the common people. The 1690s presented an important political turning point, as William III transformed England into a European power, and the tax burden grew commensurately. Yet there is now reason to doubt that the new century witnessed such significant social changes as the disappearance of the smallholder.⁵¹ The events of the years around 1700, while significant, should not prevent one from seeing continuities between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵²

There are good socio-economic and religious reasons for stopping in the middle of the eighteenth century. Social and economic changes began to quicken at that time, as the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation and parliamentary enclosure began to change both town and countryside.⁵³ Norman Sykes believed that, although Addison was writing 'during the high church *régime* of Anne', he had nevertheless 'discerned the features of rural religion which persisted throughout the greater part of the century'.⁵⁴ Yet it has become clear that there was no single entity that can be called 'the eighteenth-century Church'. The Church may have reached its lowest ebb sometime around the middle of the century.⁵⁵ It was already losing contact with its popular constituency and showing signs of inflexibility. The danger signs can be found, not just in the north, but also in those southern dioceses where it was in theory relatively strong. In 1739 John Wesley and George Whitefield broke from the parochial system by preaching in the fields outside Bristol, a development which has particular symbolic significance. In July, Wesley preached for the first time in Wiltshire.⁵⁶ The birth of Methodism marked a watershed for the Anglican Church, even though the movement would formally remain within the Church for another fifty years. In the eighty years between 1660 and 1740, the Church

⁵¹ J. M. Neeson, 'An eighteenth-century peasantry', pp. 24–59, in J. Rule and R. Malcolmson, eds., *Protest and Survival: Essays for E. P. Thompson* (London, 1993); D. E. Ginter, 'Measuring the decline of the small landowner', pp. 27–47, in B. A. Holderness and M. Turner, eds., *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700–1920* (London and Rio Grande, 1991).

⁵² G. Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680–1730* (London, 1982), p. ix.

⁵³ P. Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992); M. Overton, *The Agricultural Revolution* (Cambridge, 1995). Gilbert provides the clearest statement of this interpretation.

⁵⁴ Sykes, *Church and State*, p. 230.

⁵⁵ Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *The Church of England*, p. 21; cf. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion*.

⁵⁶ *The Journal of the Revd John Wesley*, A.M. (London, 1909–16), vol. II, p. 243.

and its clergy wasted the popular support that they attracted at the Restoration. They showed that they understood popular religious beliefs no better than the puritans had done, and by their intolerance of dissent and insistence upon their clerical monopoly they alienated many people. The gulf between the Church and the people grew larger in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

This section will end, as it began, with *The Spectator*. Mr Spectator's discourse on the social aspects of worship was part of an extensive case study of life in Coverley parish. He spent a month there, rather in the manner of an ethnographer seeking to provide his own 'thick description' of an alien society and culture, and there he witnessed Sir Roger hunting and learned of his superstitious witchcraft beliefs, among many other amusing activities.⁵⁷ The author of letter no. 112, Joseph Addison, was more familiar with parish life than he may have been prepared to admit. His father, Launcelot Addison, had been rector of the Wiltshire parish of Milston in the late seventeenth century, and his grandfather also was a cleric.⁵⁸ Because *The Spectator* was political propaganda intended to ridicule the Tory gentlemen and High Church clergymen who were to be found in the country, these letters are not reliable evidence about eighteenth-century religion. Yet the methodology of the parish case study remains valid. An assessment of the social context of religion must start by looking at worship in its parishes.

It would be impossible to study all ten thousand of England's parishes, so this book will focus on the three hundred or so that lay within the county of Wiltshire in south-western England. Whether or not one regards a county as a distinct community, there is no doubt that it provides a convenient unit of analysis, since many of the records are organised on a county basis. No county can claim to be typical, of course, and recent research on the eighteenth-century Church has stressed the importance of differences between dioceses.⁵⁹ The Church was, in theory, in a particularly strong position in the diocese of Salisbury, two of whose three archdeaneries were located in Wiltshire. The parishes in the diocese were smaller and the value of its benefices were higher than those in northern dioceses. The bishopric was in the second tier of dioceses, less desirable and lucrative than Durham, London or Winchester, but preferable to Bath and Wells or Carlisle. Because the diocese was more compact than such sprawling dioceses as Lincoln and Norwich, the bishop had more opportunity to centralise power in his own hands, reducing

⁵⁷ *The Spectator*, nos. 115, 117. For the concept of 'thick description', see C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

⁵⁸ Launcelot Addison was no mere parish incumbent, however. In addition to being dean of Lichfield, he was also author of several treatises, including *Introduction to the Sacrament* (London, 1686), whose publisher claimed that many ministers had found it the fittest exposition to give to those who were poor and of mean capacity. Spurr, *Restoration Church*, p. 342.

⁵⁹ Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, *The Church of England*, pp. 12–13. Although Jacob finds no evidence of regional variations in religious practice, there were considerable differences in the effectiveness of the church courts of different dioceses. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion*, pp. 224, 135–54.

the importance of archdeacons. Salisbury was fortunate in the quality of its bishops after the Restoration. Two, Seth Ward and Gilbert Burnet, presided consecutively for no less than half a century and did so conscientiously, despite their political commitments. Until illness and a vitriolic dispute with the dean dissipated his powers in his final years, Ward, who was bishop from 1667 to 1688, brought administrative competence and concern for his clergy's cure of souls. Diocesan officials continued to use his meticulous calculations and surveys of clerical incomes throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Gilbert Burnet, who succeeded Ward as bishop from 1689 to 1715, was determined to reinvigorate the Church in his diocese. His promotion of Queen Anne's Bounty is well known, and his membership of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge showed his support for religious revival at a national level. In Salisbury diocese, he sought to reform the consistory court, to improve the theological training and incomes of his clergy, and to raise standards of pastoral care. Burnet personally visited many of the parishes in his diocese, where he preached and confirmed, and the significance he attributed to ordination was expressed in the care with which he examined candidates for it. Unfortunately, his reform campaign was frustrated by the refusal of the clergy to co-operate with a bishop whose Low Church politics had earned him a reputation for caring more about dissenters than the Church.⁶¹

If the Church depended upon the support of the landed gentry, then it was in an enviable position in Wiltshire. The county possessed a strong aristocracy and gentry, whose estates were scattered across the landscape from Longleat and Wilton in the south to Lydiard and Draycot to the north. Wiltshire, like many other shires, was divided into distinctive farming regions that were as different as chalk and cheese, a phrase that describes the contrast between the arable chalk downs to the south and the pastoral cheese country to the north.⁶² This contrast had religious significance, because the northern pastoral parishes were often larger and had their population scattered between distinct hamlets, presenting the clergy with a significant pastoral challenge. It has been argued that separate family farms were more prevalent in the cheese than the chalk and that these encouraged greater independence in religion.⁶³ The chalk was characterised by the large estates of such magnates as the earls of Pembroke and Montgomery and the dukes of Somerset. Yet the landed gentry were a strong presence everywhere, in the chalk, the cheese and the county's many towns and boroughs.⁶⁴ The

⁶⁰ E. A. O. Whiteman, 'The episcopate of Dr. Seth Ward, bishop of Exeter (1662 to 1667) and Salisbury (1667–1688/9) with special reference to the ecclesiastical problems of his time' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1951); D1/27/1/1, ff. 73–112v (Table of Benefices); D1/48/4.

⁶¹ Foxcroft, pp. 499–503. Burnet donated £300 a year for charitable purposes which included augmenting the incomes of poorer clergymen. SPCK, AL 53.

⁶² E. Kerridge, 'Agriculture c. 1500–1793', in VCH *Wilts.*, IV, pp. 43–64.

⁶³ J. Thirsk, 'Seventeenth-century agriculture and social change', in P. Seaver, ed., *Seventeenth-Century England* (New York, 1976), pp. 72–110; Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion*.

⁶⁴ J. Adams, *Index Villaris* (London, 1680).

largest number of towns were in the region of clothing industry to the north-west, and these cloth towns proved to be important centres for dissent in the late seventeenth century, although the county's 4 per cent of separatists in 1676 was close to the average in the archdiocese of Canterbury.⁶⁵ Wiltshire's industry was older than most (and was now entering a period of decline), but cottage industry was an increasingly familiar characteristic of the English countryside.

Most of the county's gentlemen supported the Church of England, although some were Catholic and many were reluctant to proceed against nonconformity during the Restoration. A common response to James II's Three Questions was to assert the importance of defending the Church.⁶⁶ In the eighteenth century, a small number of Tory families provided the county's MPs and did so, with a few exceptions, by mutual agreement rather than by election.⁶⁷ Further research will be needed to determine whether the picture of social and religious relations presented in this study was also characteristic of other English counties, although there is no reason to believe that the problems the Church faced there and the behaviour of its clerics were unique. Yet, the Church in Wiltshire was as close to a position of strength in confronting these pastoral challenges as anywhere in England, and this makes the story of the relations between the clergy and the laity there of particular interest.

THE CHURCH IN DANGER

... about Michaelmas last they committed a Riot in ye Church at which time two of them ... also severall times (but especially ye Sunday before Palm Sunday) shamefully polluted with human excrements ye Church Porch to near ye quantity of a Barrowfull which they lay agt ye door & also filled the keyhole, daub'd all ye door over with it, & thrust as much as they could into ye Church.⁶⁸

Two weeks before Easter Day in 1676 the Revd James Garth found the porch of Hilperton church covered with human excrement. It is hard to imagine a more explicit symbolic demonstration of ill-feeling against the clergy and the Church of England of which they were the local representatives. Garth complained that his parishioners had used 'malitious invectives to blemish' him and had 'conspired ... To eject mee out of my Living'. The clergy felt themselves to be under attack in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The cry of 'the Church in danger' was loudest in the reign of Queen Anne, but the sense of threat persisted throughout the period. The clergy's foes were legion and included nonconformity, anticlericalism and irreligion. Dissenters were the most visible threat. In the late seventeenth century their presence was a constant

⁶⁵ Whiteman, *Compton Census*, pp. 106–35.

⁶⁶ G. Duckett, ed., *Penal Laws and Test Act* (London, 1882), pp. 212–19.

⁶⁷ VCH Wilts, V, pp. 195–230; B. D. Henning, ed., *House of Commons 1660–1690* (London, 1983), q.v. 'Wiltshire'; *A Poll for the Wiltshire Election of 1705* (1705). ⁶⁸ D1/41/4/43.

reminder of the failure of the Restoration settlement of religion. After 1689 the issue of the treatment of dissent defined an ideological fault line between High Church Tories, who wished to restore the Church's authority and status, and Whigs, who were suspicious of its disciplinary machinery. In the 1730s Parliament debated a series of bills which appeared to constitute a concerted campaign against the Church and passed one, the Mortmain Act of 1736.⁶⁹

The clergy and the laity alike believed that anticlericalism was widespread. At his trial in 1710 the symbol of the High Church movement Dr Henry Sacheverell grieved that 'never were the ministers of Christ so abused and vilified . . . never was infidelity and atheism itself so impudent'. The Low Church bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury believed that 'None but the confederates of our enemies, and those who are deluded by them can imagine our church to be in danger'. Nonetheless, he agreed that '*priestcraft* grew to be another word in fashion, and the enemies of religion vented all their impieties under the cover of these words'.⁷⁰ Although the assault upon 'priestcraft' reached new heights in the 1690s, criticism of the clergy was already a familiar theme. In 1670 John Eachard had attacked the pretensions of the clergy in *The Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy*. Launcelot Addison was one of several divines who leaped to the clergy's defence, arguing that they had been held in contempt in all ages because their spiritual functions required them to express uncomfortable truths. Another contemporary agreed in 1684 that because 'Ministers tell the People of their faults . . . it is a kind of pleasing revenge to find fault with them again'. '[C]hief and leading Men in their Country', he reflected, 'seemed never more delighted, at Market or such like publick Meetings, then when they have fallen upon the Subject of reviling the Ministry.'⁷¹ The clergy suffered as a target of Restoration wit, and in the eighteenth century they became stock figures of fun in literature and prints.⁷² As a parish clerk observed, 'many people [were] glad to meet with anything ill done or ill reported of a Minister nowadays'. The rector of Avebury, John White, agreed that 'the mobb is very apt to beleve any reports that are raised upon ministers'.⁷³ The clergy and leading laymen shared the opinion that irreligion was a third enemy that was undermining the fabric of English society and could be found wherever they looked. *The Letter to a*

⁶⁹ G. V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State 1688–1730* (Oxford, 1975); Best, *Temporal Pillars*, pp. 103–9; S. Taylor, 'Sir Robert Walpole, the Church of England, and the Quakers Tithe Bill of 1736', *Historical Journal* 28 (1985): 51–77; N. Sykes, *Edmund Gibson* (London, 1926), pp. 149–66.

⁷⁰ Bennett, *The Tory Crisis*, pp. 19, 116; D. Slatter, ed., *Diary of Thomas Naish* (Devizes, 1965), p. 55. Many Wiltshire clergymen refused to sign an address to the queen, after the victory at Ramillies, into which Burnet tried to insert the phrase that the Church was not in danger.

⁷¹ Launcelot Addison, *A Modest Plea for the Clergy* (London, 1677), pp. 125, 129; Anon., *The Case of Peoples Duty in Living Under a Scandalous Minister Stated and Resolved* (London, 1684), pp. 5–6.

⁷² Spurr, *Restoration Church*, pp. 219, 234; Jacob, *Lay People and Religion*, pp. 44–51.

⁷³ D1/42/60, f. 181v; John White to Sir Richard Holford, recd 27 Jan. 1695[6], WRO 184/1.

Convocation Man observed that ‘a open looseness in men’s principles and practices, and a settled contempt of religion and the priesthood have prevailed everywhere’.⁷⁴ Deism represented irreligion’s intellectual guise and the impiety of the masses in city streets and country lanes its popular guise. Anxiety about irreligion and immorality manifested itself in urban areas in the 1690s in the formation of societies for the reformation of manners. The provincial clergy also bemoaned the ignorance and impiety of their congregations. One commentator claimed that concubinage was particularly rife in Wiltshire and appealed for the correction of atheism. With the support of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge parsons took steps to reinvigorate parish religion.⁷⁵

Anticlericalism must be viewed within its broader intellectual and political contexts, as exposed by the recent research of Justin Champion and Mark Goldie.⁷⁶ Freethinkers and other critics of the clergy coined the term ‘priestcraft’ to describe the corruption of ‘true’ religion by the clergy and the Established Church as an independent source of authority. The clergy were denounced for creating doctrinal obscurity and emphasising rites and ceremonies in order to ensure their interpretive and functional monopoly, for their dogmatic intolerance of heterodox beliefs, and for their use of religion for their own private aggrandisement, turning religion into a trade. Radical republicans saw clericalism as a form of tyranny which sought the spiritual enslavement of the people, while High Churchmen followed Laud and Heylyn in seeing an independent clerical estate as central to the Church’s recovery of status and authority. The critique of priestcraft contributed to a debate which had both intellectual and political facets. Opposing views of the legitimacy of clerical authority differentiated Tory defenders of the Established Church from Whig defenders of liberty of conscience.

Expressions of anticlericalism also had a social dimension. The clergy had to defend themselves from verbal and physical attack in numerous country parishes. In Damerham South two men abused and assaulted the vicar Thomas Derby in 1680. One assailant threatened the minister with his stick, although several onlookers stopped him from striking Derby. The other called Derby a ‘Rogue & Rascall’, threw beer in his face and struck him with his fist. He warned the vicar that he could humble him just as the parishioners of Rogborne had humbled their parson, indicating that it was not an isolated incident.⁷⁷ Thomas Twittee was

⁷⁴ Bennett, *The Tory Crisis*, p. 48; Burnet, *Pastoral Care*, p. xxii.

⁷⁵ Jacob, *Lay People and Religion*, ch. 5; W. O. B. Allen and E. McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698–1898* (London, 1898), p. 69. See also chapter 10 below.

⁷⁶ This paragraph draws heavily upon J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992), *passim*, esp. chs. 5–7; and M. Goldie, ‘Priestcraft and the birth of Whiggism’, in N. Phillipson and Q. Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 209–31.

⁷⁷ A1/110, H1680/1 (Informations). The assailants were Gyles Early (or Yearly) of Damerham and Richard Early of Salisbury. Rogborne is probably Rockbourne, which lay in the parish of Martin just to the north of Damerham.

attacked at his induction into the rectory of Draycot Foliat in 1665. Inhabitants struck and knocked him over, drawing blood, and then forced him to leave the churchyard.⁷⁸ Richard Day of Dauntsey chased the rector of Brinkworth, Francis Henry Carey, into the churchyard. Day, who was on horseback, threatened Carey with his whip and called him the ‘son of a whore’, but two men stopped him from whipping the rector.⁷⁹ Widow Everitt verbally abused the vicar of Westport while he was performing divine service in the chapel of Charlton in 1663.⁸⁰ Mathew Clark laughed at the rector of Bremhill during divine service.⁸¹ Attacks on individual clergymen manifested themselves in abuse and disruption of the church and its services. The inhabitants of Draycot Foliat disturbed divine service by ‘making mocks & rimes at the Comon Prayer’. In Knooke parishioners threw stones at the church and boycotted communion.⁸² The churchwardens and other inhabitants of Netheravon removed the cushion on which the vicar knelt at prayers and laughed at him when he complained. They also disturbed divine service on the feast day of the Holy Innocents in December 1687 ‘by tuning, whistling, talking, & making terrible noises by tumbling of stones . . . about the Belfry loft’. Afterwards they left the loft and walked through the church, ‘not taking the least notice of Divine Service being then in Reading, except by putting off their Hats’.⁸³ Thomas Chambers urinated against the pulpit of Norton Bavant church during divine service, a choice of location which was surely significant.⁸⁴

The clergy interpreted these incidents as assaults, not just on them as individuals, but upon the entire clerical profession, a view they expressed by suing their abusers for vilification of the clergy. The Church was particularly sensitive to evidence of anticlericalism. Although it seems unlikely that the common people were aware of publications concerning priestcraft, many of the parish clergy may have been, and this can only have heightened their sensitivity to criticism.⁸⁵ The description of ministers as ‘black coats’ in the late seventeenth century indicates that the Restoration had not entirely extinguished views that had led the Quakers and other sects to rebel against the control of the clergy. Yet abuse of the clergy involved more than traditional popular anticlericalism, exacerbated by the turmoil of the Civil War and its aftermath, or frustrated nonconformity. The laity valued the contribution that individual clerics made to the religious and

⁷⁸ PRO, E 134, 23&24 Charles II, Hil 2 (testimony of Austin Hodges and George Jacques, both gentlemen from Chiseldon). Service was being read in the ruins of the church.

⁷⁹ A1/110, E1686 (Informations). ⁸⁰ D3/12, 1663. ⁸¹ D1/54/6/3 (1674, A&P), f. 30/44.

⁸² D5/28, 1665, f. 4. ⁸³ D5/28, 1688, f. 70. ⁸⁴ D1/54/21/4 (1708, W&W).

⁸⁵ John Lewis of Holt read widely from the writings of John Locke, as well as William Freke, *A Vindication of the Unitarians* (London, 1690). His careful selection of passages from John Walker’s *An Attempt Towards Recovering an Account of the Numbers and Sufferings of the Clergy of the Church of England who were Sequester’d, Harass’d, &c. . . in the . . . Times of the Great Rebellion* (London, 1714) may reveal his own sense of vulnerability. WRO 1981/1; Bodleian Library, MS Eng Misc f. 10, Diary 1718–60. I am grateful to Stephen Hobbs of the Wiltshire Record Office for bringing the Bodleian diary source to my attention and to Kenneth and Helen Rogers for giving me access to a copy, of which they are preparing an edition.

secular life of the community. The lack of a minister could have a devastating effect on the religious welfare of inhabitants. A particularly vivid example was Baydon, a chapelry in the parish of Ramsbury, where the curate received a stipend of only £6 a year for his maintenance. The villagers wrote a series of presentments and petitions complaining of the poor service they received as a result, 'which is notorious to the whole country'. They either had no minister at all or had a deacon who could not perform communion and who was forced 'to betake himself to the servile works of husbandry, which render the service & worship of God contemptible in the eyes of the people'. Religious worship collapsed in the village as a result, 'whereby there hath ensued much error in Doctrine & profaneness in life & conversation, to the dishonour of God & the destruction of poore Souls'.⁸⁶ Similar pleas for help came from Stratton, where wardens presented that 'the church & parish for the most part is run to ruine and confusion',⁸⁷ and from Westbury where all things were 'out of joynt for want of a menester'.⁸⁸ The importance of the parson to his parishioners can be seen in the frequency of complaints about clerical pluralism and non-residence.⁸⁹

The arrival of a minister could stimulate a dramatic revival of religious life. At Shalbourne the churchwardens reported in 1679 that 'all the parish comes to church since Mr May came, in beter order then they were formerly wont to doe'. The parish rejoiced in the replacement of the previous incumbent, who had been a common swearer, brawler and drunkard.⁹⁰ The laity wrote petitions and testimonials on behalf of ministers. The inhabitants of Swallowcliffe asked that their curate be allowed to remain with them, even though he was in trouble for performing clandestine marriages, because they had 'receaved much comfort & content by his officiating amongst us'. The dean of Salisbury answered their petition by agreeing that the curate could remain in Swallowcliffe, so long as he promised not to marry couples illegally in future.⁹¹ The parishioners of Marlborough St Peter wrote to recommend that Farewell Perry, the curate of Mildenhall, be appointed in place of the recently deceased incumbent, and they asked that his meagre stipend be supplemented by appointment to the prebend of Winterbourne Earles, requests to which the bishop assented.⁹² Churchwardens used visitation presentments, which were designed to detect moral and religious offenders, to express their satisfaction with their minister. The Downton wardens reported in 1662 that their curate preached 'to the great content of many well affected people', even though they admitted they were not

⁸⁶ D5/28, 1671, f. 14; 1675, f. 43; 1678, f. 34; 1692, f. 29; Tanner MS 143, f. 119; quoting D5/17/1/2.

⁸⁷ D5/28, 1674, f. 29. ⁸⁸ D25/12, May 1665. ⁸⁹ See chapter 5.

⁹⁰ D5/28, 1679, f. 55; 1678, f. 2. May was presumably a curate. A new incumbent, Daniel Stockwood, arrived in 1681.

⁹¹ D5/28, 1668, f. 13. The curate gave a bond promising to perform no more clandestine marriages, but he soon broke his promise and tried to recover his bond.

⁹² D1/14/1(d), f. 83. The bishop granted both requests and Perry's collation to Marlborough and the prebendary were recorded on 23 January 1685. D1/2/23, ff. 27v–28.

sure whether he was licensed.⁹³ Ministers were valued for their contributions to parish government, including the help they provided in drawing up rates, administering poor relief, and preparing presentments for ecclesiastical visitations.⁹⁴ Villagers naturally turned to the minister for help at times of crisis. Thus Roger Jarrett went to the vicar Mr Hodges for advice about what to do about his mentally unbalanced son, who kept trying to set the house on fire.⁹⁵

Praise for individual clergymen was matched by criticism of others. Assaults against the clergy were rarely isolated incidents. They can be understood only in the context of broader disputes between the clergy and the laity. Laymen abused their minister when they were disappointed, disgusted, or angered by his behaviour. Such episodes should be seen as attacks on individuals rather than as generalised anticlericalism. The assault on Thomas Twittee as he read prayers at Draycot Foliat was the response to an extended campaign by the rector to claim tithes. By taking direct action to stop the new rector, so that he could not read the liturgy in the ruins of the abandoned church, inhabitants might be able to claim that he was not the legal incumbent because he had not fulfilled the requirements of the Act of Uniformity. Tithes were also involved at Netheravon, whose inhabitants were later to petition for a new minister because they objected to the violence and quarrelsomeness of the incumbent.⁹⁶ Matthew Whittle of Westport St Mary found himself the subject of a suit to correct his scandalous behaviour, because his drunkenness gave ‘a very great offense and discouragem[en]t to the congregacon’.⁹⁷ The inhabitants of Knooke wrote to express the ‘great comforte’ they received from their curate, after four years of bitter conflict with his predecessor. They expressed the hope that ‘he may be continued amongst us wee haveing been much profitted by him’ and promised they would ‘wth all cheerfullness submitt to the discipline of the Church and performe all conformity’.⁹⁸ Parishioners objected to individual clerics rather than to the clerical estate as a whole. Yet lay–clerical disputes nevertheless damaged the reputation of the Church and its clergy. They also damaged the worship of the Church, causing congregations to boycott, disrupt or ridicule church services.

A FACTIOUS, PROPHANE AND REFRACTORY PEOPLE

The parish of Hilperton in Wiltshire demonstrates the complexity of conflict between the laity and the clergy, so that issues of anticlericalism, irreligion, non-conformity, popular recreations and finance were interwoven.⁹⁹ James Garth was

⁹³ D1/54/1/4 (1662, W&W), ff. 39b, 41b.

⁹⁴ In Damerham South, for example. D1/42/59, f. 139v.

⁹⁵ The son was subsequently hauled off to prison. A1/110, T1666 (Informations). Jarrett’s reference to the prison indicates that this incident occurred in Malmesbury, despite confusion over the minister’s name. ⁹⁶ WAM 45, pp. 84–6. ⁹⁷ D1/42/62, ff. 2v–3. ⁹⁸ D5/21/1, 1671.

⁹⁹ This section is based on the following sources, unless otherwise indicated: D1/41/1/46 (12 March 1689/90); D1/41/4/43 (n.d.); D1/54/8 (18 Jan. 1675/6).

the vicar of Hilperton for thirty-nine years, from 1673 to 1702.¹⁰⁰ Although he was a pluralist, pastoral neglect was not a source of complaint. The vicar appointed a curate to his other parish of Keevil, and with the exception of an isolated incident when he complained that a man used opprobrious words against the clergy he encountered relatively little trouble there.¹⁰¹ Garth was not so lucky in Hilperton, where he resided and officiated. He became a beleaguered and isolated figure who quarrelled with parishioners over many issues.

James Garth painted a black picture of worship in his parish, where he thought irreligion was endemic. Although there were over 200 people in his congregation who were old enough to receive communion, he observed that there were only '14 Christians amongst them (I mean Christian communicants)'.¹⁰² Many parishioners failed to attend church regularly or to send their children to be catechised. Nonconformity was a persistent problem, for the parish was home to both Quakers and Baptists, but Garth reported in 1676 that only 35 of his 213 parishioners were nonconformists.¹⁰³ Garth's problems cannot be attributed entirely to nonconformity. Indeed, he used the courts against 'conformist' parishioners and complained when process against them ceased. The minister embarked on a solitary campaign against popular sociability and recreations. Villagers profaned the Sabbath 'by Drunkenness, Fives-Playing, Cockfighting etc. Generally making no other use of the Lords house and day, but the one to bee the place, the other the Time of all manner of Prophanesse'. The minister presented those who sold drink without a licence and failed to keep good order 'espe[cial]ly on the L[or]ds day in times of Divine Service'.¹⁰⁴ He gained a Quarter Sessions order to remove a widow's cottage from parsonage land where he claimed idle persons played cards during divine service.¹⁰⁵

James Garth quarrelled with members of his congregation over tithes and the use of church land. In addition to presenting them at visitations and Quarter Sessions for their neglect and misbehaviour, he was also the most litigious clergyman in Wiltshire, suing thirty-three defendants for their failure to pay their tithes.¹⁰⁶ Inhabitants expropriated portions of the glebe and the churchyard with the full co-operation of the churchwardens. Most of Hilperton's arable and pasture land had been enclosed by 1663¹⁰⁷ and Garth complained that inhabitants had 'inclos'd all the best arable Ground belonging to ye Parish, & converted it into pasture, & do still persist in inclosing more & more; & part of the best

¹⁰⁰ When Garth died at the age of 82 he had been ill for many years, preventing him from fulfilling his duties properly. Twelve years earlier he had complained of 'laboring under several of the infirmities of old age . . . as ye strangury, the stone, the wind, the scurvy'.

¹⁰¹ D1/54/8 (16 Jan. 1675/6). ¹⁰² By 1690 the number of communicants was down to twelve.

¹⁰³ Whiteman, *Compton Census*, p. 122. ¹⁰⁴ A1/110, E1680.

¹⁰⁵ A1/160/3, T1677; A1/160/4, T1679, E1682; A1/110, E1680.

¹⁰⁶ D1/39/1/59; PRO, Exchequer Bill Books, IND 1/16831, Wiltshire, case nos. 161, 162, 186, 260; IND 1/16835, Wiltshire, case nos. 14, 23, 30; WRO 1699/18, Book of Quaker Sufferings.

¹⁰⁷ VCH *Wilts* VII, pp. 86–7.