

Books for Christmas

27 November 1992

GILLIAN EVANS reviews a book that asks if the late-medieval English Church was as much in need of reform as the reformers supposed

THE IMAGERY THEY MISSED

Eamon Duffy

THE STRIPPING OF THE ALTARS

Yale University Press £29.95 (0-300-05342-8)

THE REFORMATION has always been explained partly as a response to corruption and abuse and decadence in the late-medieval Church in the West, which badly needed to be challenged and corrected. This remarkable study robustly asks the question whether this is quite true. Some of the patterns of life and worship, and above all the symbols and imagery, which were the stuff of common experience for the ordinary people of God met a pastoral and human need so directly and powerfully that they cannot simply be dismissed. More: they were in many instances created by pastoral demand. They cannot be read as the result of imposition from above by vested interests in the hierarchy (the conspiracy theory held by some of the reformers and their heirs). This book takes us inside the lives and viewpoints of "decent, timid men and women" who saw "familiar and beloved observances" stripped away, and "the destruction of a vast and resonant world of symbols which... they both understood and controlled".

Dr Duffy has written in every sense a sizeable book, with very good plates showing the visual images at work in contemporary contexts. He has had to straddle the invisible boundary between the medieval and the modern worlds. Scholars on both sides have tended to shrink from doing this, to the impoverishment of the common enterprise. He has also had to give an account of the interplay of factors which are frequently treated as though they fell into different disciplines: liturgy and theology; theology and history. And he has had to keep his balance on a tightrope stretched between critical analysis and engagement with feeling. It is not easy to portray religious emotion sympathetically without sliding into indulgence.

The first part of the book is handled

thematically and the second chronologically. On the whole this works, and it makes for clarity. In Part I we begin with liturgy, learning and the laity. The liturgy, which in the Church of England's 16th-century Englishing became a conscious vehicle for the theological instruction of the worshippers, was already so by way of the swing of events through the year, in the great feasts and in sacramental life in the late Middle Ages. The mass, Dr Duffy suggests, was not quite the non-participatory event for the laity it seemed scandalously to be to many of the reformers. Weekday masses were celebrated without elaborate ritual at altars where there was no intervening screen; and the laity experienced there something which must have been very like the quiet intimacy of an early-morning holy communion in the more recent Church of England. Anyone who has watched the raptness of ordinary people present at such a mass in parts of southern Europe today can get something of the sense of how it was then.

The rather glossy coffee-table devotional reading material of the wealthy late-medieval literate layman (and woman) is contrasted with the kind of thing "the class of men who became churchwardens in the parishes of 15th-century England" might collect for their own edification. Here we glimpse the continuance of exactly the coexistence of Christianity with paganism with which Augustine and Gregory the Great struggled, and which is still there in modern newspaper horoscopes. One commonplace book contains zodiacal material and prognostications and a formula for conjuring angels into a child's thumbnail so that they could assist with divination. There are charms: to St Apollonia against the toothache; an invocation of Christ, the apostles, prophets, angels and saints against fever; a narrative charm against malaria in the form of a conversation between Christ and St Peter. All this hints tantalisingly at answers to what becomes the central question of this book: how far theological understanding really penetrated into the grass-roots, either before or after the Reformation.

The two chapters on "corporate Christians" and on "the saints" describe a natural popular ecclesiology of communion vigorously lived out in later-medieval England. In guild and parish, people experienced living as a community with a directness which puts the poverty of today's notions of "community care" in reproachful contrast. In their sense of community with the Christians who had gone before them into the life to come, people showed a practical desire to arrange for assistance in both directions. Nascent talent for the creation of a tourist trade was realised in the business which could be generated around saints' shrines. But underneath and within all this there was a profound universal sense of the reality of the "communion of saints".

Dr Duffy does not pull punches in his accounts of prayer, where devotions and spells were often interused, nor in what he has to say about death and the theology of purgatory and indulgences. But the very frankness of late-medieval mingling of the sound with the dubious presses further the lesson of



The hand as the mirror of salvation: a 15th-century coloured woodcut in *The Smithsonian Book of Books* (Smithsonian Institution Press, £24.95; 0-89599-030-X). Below, the feast of Dives, in the 12th-century Lincoln Cathedral frieze, from *The Romanesque Frieze and its Spectator* (Harvey Miller for the Dean and Chapter, £48; 1-872501-70-2)



all this evidence: that this is what people need and feel comfortable with, and will resort to in every generation in one form or another; and that the Church can work effectively through it all.

Part II takes us through the story of the progressive reforming governmental "attacks" of the Tudors on traditional religion. There is an examination of the impact of reform as it arrived at parish level. One is irresistibly reminded of more recent examples of interference by politicians in the working of systems whose delicate balance is upset by the

failure to foresee consequences; and where there is quiet resistance under surface compliance. Perhaps the most important point Dr Duffy seeks to make here is not that things were slow to change at grass-roots level (we have known that for a long time), but that much that was considered to be characteristically "Protestant" in the changes was not really new at all. Many of the good things the reformers did were continuances of the best in this rich world of later-medieval religious life.

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