


## **Deliver Us From Evil**

The English Laity on the Eve of the Reformation  
Based on *The Stripping of the Altars* by Eamon Duffy

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10 April 1996

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HIST 643

*And now it is time for you to renounce the Old Ways*

*And see a new dawn rise.*

*– Song of Sophia, by Dead Can Dance, 1985*

Religion can be a function of one's community or an intensely personal experience. <sup>Why not both?</sup> The Reformation sparked by Martin Luther reverberated across Europe throughout the late ~~Middle Ages~~. <sup>sixteenth century</sup> England, though separated from the continent, was no less susceptible on the eve of the Reformation to the waves of religious change that washed over the Catholic church and spawned the various Protestant denominations ~~than~~ France or Germany. Eamon Duffy, in his 1992 book *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, paints an exhaustive picture of the position of the English laity during this tumultuous time and discusses at length the varying levels of receptivity the people of England had <sup>for</sup> the Reformation movement.

In England, the religion of the clergy and the elite was the same as the religion of the common man <sup>according to Duffy</sup> the people extracted their beliefs from the liturgy of the Church.

The traditional Catholic religion was as strong as ever as the Reformation dawned (2-4). The veneration of the body of Christ was the focus of late medieval religious aspirations (91) and the laity was not only intimately involved with the Mass but often did more than the clergy expected of them (11); their commitment to the Church helped slow the spread of the Reformation in England. Due to the continuing development and improvement of moveable type printing, books began to play an increasing part in the religious life and education of the laity. Along with books, various pagan, pre-Christian, and superstitious beliefs fused into the common people's practice of religion to create a hybridized and binding way of life for the community.

Primers, or Books of Hours, were the main way the common people had of learning the importance of the diverse aspects of the liturgy. These books were initially hand-copied manuscripts that were rare and fairly expensive. As printing became more wide-spread, primers could be found for a few pence or several pounds, simple and plain or ornate and lavishly illustrated with woodcuts or paintings (209). These texts were sacred and holy books, mostly written in Latin as possession of a vernacular primer opened one up to suspicion, that focused on the worship and divine nature of God (213-4).

The typical primer contained a calendar of feasts, fasts, and the various holy days of the year. It usually included a listing of the Saint's days as well and most had some kind of almanac in them. In the calendar, the religious and the pagan combined to create an air of familiarity for the lay people; associating Easter with <sup>the</sup> spring and Christmas with the winter solstice helped maintain continuity for them (14). There were also hymns, prayers, devotions, and charms found in most primer pages. The prayers and devotions were most often dedicated to Christ, the Virgin Mary, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the Saints, and the Archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael (216-7, 270, 256).

The primers also gave the laity a sense of protection from the forces of evil, which they were very aware of and held a true and implicit belief in. This belief in Satan and the powers of evil that shadows their belief in God shows a fundamental blurring of religion with magical or superstitious beliefs (266-9). The primers helped the common

people cross the orthodoxy of their religion with their superstitious beliefs to not only give them reason to pray, but to increase the beneficial and protective powers of prayer as well (275).

The inclusion of charms and incantations against Satan is not surprising as the liturgy reinforced the belief in the power of evil in three important ways. Rogation was the three days before Ascension and its procession consisted of banners, bells, and crosses that supposedly scared away evil spirits (279-80). Baptism of a baby was a symbolic exorcism of evil spirits. Priests blessed salt and water on Sundays and exorcised these substances by repeated signs of the Cross to purify them. They believed that blessed salt could disperse the delusions, wickedness, craftiness, and cunning of devils and that holy water, applied to people or inanimate objects such as hearths, beds, and houses, could drive out demons and disease and aid fertility. They also believed that blessed candles, used at Candlemas in early February, had the power of the virtue of the Cross and could banish Satan and his minions (281-2).

Latin remained the language of the church, and therefore of the primers, through the reign of Henry VIII. This may seem like a difficulty for the majority of the largely ill-educated laity; according to Duffy, the laity seemed "to have managed with just a partial grasp of Latin." (222) Even though the people probably had only rudimentary literary skills, the repetition of the religious aspects of the primers made them familiar – this repetition and familiarity also helped give the books their spiritual power and importance

to the laity (220). The use of numbers to remember various aspects of the liturgy – Ten Commandments, Seven Deadly Sins, Five Wounds of Christ, Seven Words on the Cross, Five Joys and Five Sorrows of Mary and the seven Sacraments – is an interesting combination of scripture, teaching, and memory devices reminiscent of the slowly fading oral culture.

Other books were important to the religious knowledge of the laity. The *Oculus Sacerdotis* was a manual for confessors schooling them on the seven deadly sins, an instruction book for the laity in essential religious knowledge, and contained theological information on the sacraments for priests to reference (54-5). Similarly, the *Manipulus Curatorum* emphasized clerical knowledge of scripture and practical skills priests needed in dealing with lay people (56). Two other books, *Instruction For Parish Priests*, by John Mink, and the *Cura Clericalis*, based on the *Oculus*, helped priests both learned and lightly educated guide the laity through their religious lives (55, 57).

Books explicitly for the common man, such as those written by Robert Reynes, a lord's clerk in Acle, and Richard Hill, a London grocer, mixed the secular with the religious. Books like these were likely to include the Ten Commandments and instructions on how to obey them, charm prayers against toothache and disease, astrological signs and information about them, and mnemonic devices or quatrain-style poetry designed to help other commoners learn and remember the lessons of the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist (71-3, 76-7). Unfortunately, scriptural references

did not generally reinforce common books since only those with an episcopal license could legally possess a vernacular Bible. The inability of the laity to read vernacular Bibles tended to focus the lessons of common books on the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, and other easily remembered prayers and proverbs (80).

If the book concerned the laity outside church, Mass concerned the laity inside the church. Mass renewed the world (91) by virtue of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. The Host was so important to the community that those without God's grace were sometimes subject to bouts of hysterical blindness that prevented them from viewing the Host as the priest elevated it or deafness that prevented them from hearing the ringing bell that signified the sacring was about to begin (100-2).

The laity was not content to fulfill only the minimum requirements asked of the at Mass, such as respectful behavior while in the church and recitation of the rosary as the priest prepared the Host (118); rather, they participated in a personal way with introspective prayers meditating on the Host/Christ relationship and through ritual actions in the form of verbal responses to the priest and spoken prayers. Their participation helped focus the community aspects of Mass (122). Above all, they were to greet God with adoration and prayers of elevation upon the consecration of the Host (117).

As the Reformation gained speed and acceptance in England, the policies of Protestant monarchs Edward VI and Elizabeth clashed with those of traditionalist rulers Henry VIII and Mary. In 1532, the Ten Articles became the first official doctrine of the burgeoning Church of England. The Articles reinforced the sacraments of baptism, penance, and the Eucharist, maintained the intercessionary concept of the saints, and kept the veneration of images, although with a twist. Images were no longer to be worshipped in their own rights, but worshipped in front of as a function of honoring God (392-3). The most difficult thing for the laity to accept was the abolition of all feast days during harvest time, namely July, August, and September; votive Masses were still acceptable as long as they were of moderate solemnity and did not take the farmers away from their fields. A new church holiday on the first Sunday in October replaced the harvest time feast days (394).

This is when the laity began to show how receptive to the Reformation they really were. According to Duffy, "disobedience was very widespread and often vocal" (404) and in spite of the decree of the Ten Articles, the laity kept what feast days were most important to them. Importance of a feast day was usually a function of region and tradition, and the local clergy usually supported the people (396). By this they showed their discontent with reforms and their devotion to traditional religious practices. A prominent Chartham family, the Austens, even publicly denounced a reformist priest as a heretic and forced him to make compensation for iconoclasm done at his behest (435).

Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex and vice-gerent of spirituals to Henry VIII was the foremost reformer behind the Injunctions of 1538. The Injunctions outlawed pilgrimages, nearly the entire structure of the cults of saints, and condemned recitation of the rosary. Henry reacted by forbidding the import of English-language books without special licenses, which cut down on the availability of Protestant primers, and outlawing Anabaptists and sectaries (407-411). The laity reacted with heavy resistance to the Injunctions in favor of long-standing traditional religious practices. The clergy again sided with Henry and the laity. Henry finished off Cromwell's reformers with the Six Articles in 1539 (419-23).

This back-and-forth fight between Traditionalists and Reformers continued through the reigns of Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth. Under the royal auspices of the child monarch Edward, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer propagated both another set of Injunctions and the Chantries Act in 1547, adding more restrictions to the 1538 Injunctions. The *Book of Common Prayer* in 1552 was Cranmer's final attempt to eliminate the last vestiges of Catholic liturgy from the Church in England (448, 450-2, 454, 472-3). Even though people continued to practice some of their religious traditions, such as praying with beads, hallowing bread, water, and candles, and observing Holy Week ceremonies (449), many were afraid to voice their opposition or engage in active resistance. Others reacted violently by rioting or abducting and murdering prominent Protestant reformers (458-9).



During the reign of Mary, Catholicism returned, though it was modified through the filter of Henry VIII's Ten Articles. Latin Masses returned quickly followed by a widespread rejection of Protestant ideas in favor of a return to early 16th century English Catholic teachings (528, 531). When Elizabeth ascended the throne in late 1558, she totally repressed the reforms that, under Mary, were part and parcel of the larger European Catholic Counter-Reformation (564). Her Act of Uniformity in 1559 abolished Mass, returned the Edwardian Protestant primer, and promoted a high level of iconoclasm (566).

The confusing flip-flops of official religious belief had to be tough on a laity looking back at three centuries of Catholic traditions and practices. Of these many changes, Duffy poses an interesting question along the line of did we observe Protestants returning to Catholicism during Mary's reign or Catholics whose Catholicism re-emerged? (522) The laity proved to be largely traditionalist and resistant to the changes wrought by the Reformation. Their co-operation with royal decrees should not be seen as approval of the reforms (462), but rather as their spirit of obedience. The tides of change generally swept them along, but some resisted – violently on occasion – when they felt they needed to act to retain their religious traditions. They slowly and grudgingly accepted the religious decrees and saw the changes as unavoidable (502). They took their time, though, in selling off church ornaments, covering or destroying decorative screens and icons, clinging to the idea of another Catholic resurgence (566, 575).

BT  
 Very complete on the first question. You could be more explicit on the second, however, concerning the reaction of the laity. Still, a very good essay.