

## The Voices of Morebath, Eamon Duffy (Yale 2001)

Eamon Duffy is famous amongst revisionist historians for depicting the English Reformation from a Roman Catholic perspective. In his weighty survey, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) he challenged the traditional view that pre-reformation England contained a benighted people in the thrall of a corrupt ecclesiastical hierarchy; and replaced it with an image of a deeply spiritual people, whose very personal and local religion was thoroughly interwoven into their daily lives. He argued that more was lost than was gained from the English Reformation.

While the debate he sparked about the effect of the reformation on the lives of 'ordinary people' continues to rage, Duffy has re-entered the debate with this short book which argues the same thesis from a very intimate perspective: one hamlet on Exmoor, Morebath, with a population of not much more than 100. This remote sheep-farming community happened to possess a priest, Christopher Trychay (pronounced 'Tricky'), who was notable both for his longevity (he was in his post from 1520 to 1574, the whole period of Tudor reformation and counter-reformation), and for his habit of writing everything down, in the church accounts.

Through these accounts, in which Sir Christopher (*Sir* being the Tudor equivalent of *Father*) cannot bear to leave any figure unexplained, Duffy is able to build up a picture of parish devotional life and the way in which it was affected by the reformation upheavals.

In 1520, Morebath's religious activity was centred around its saints, whose images adorned the church: the Virgin, St George (the church's patron), Jesus (probably holding a globe, as the *Salvator mundi*), 'St Sunday' (an image of Jesus pierced by the tools of work – designed to encourage a kind of sabbatarianism), St Loy (patron of smiths and carters – a west country favourite), St Anthony (farmers), and St Anne (a favourite of married people). Sir Christopher added to these St Sidwell, an Exeter saint who was a personal favourite of his, and whose cult he promoted with great success.

Great effort was invested in keeping lights burning before the images, as well as the 'alms light' which burned on the altar in memory of the dead. The lamps were kept alight through 'stores' or devotional funds which came from profits from small flocks of sheep, church ales, and individual gifts and bequests. The stores were administered by wardens, elected annually, and in such a small parish almost everyone was involved. Many of the lights had the loyalty of particular groups: St George's light was maintained by the Young Men, all the bachelors of communicant age (about 14), who raised funds chiefly through ales, and thus St George was an important part of their social life. St Sidwell's light was maintained by the Maidens (teenage girls), and became the recipient of regular gifts of handkerchiefs, rings, beads and other intimate objects which adorned her image. Baby girls born in the parish began to be christened Sidwell. The Virgin had the most important store, maintained by 'Our Lady's Sheep', who were distributed amongst the farmers in the parish and identified by a distinctive mark cut in their ears. The most important offices were the two High Wardens, who oversaw the whole accounts, and since all heads of household were expected to serve, this responsible office was regularly held by poor men or widows. Rich parishioners served as one of the 'Five Men', who acted as bankers for church surpluses and underwrote short-term deficits. At the other end of the scale, the alms light was maintained by tiny gifts from the poorest in the parish, in memory of their dead. The parish notables are continually journeying to Exeter to make purchases, or arrange contracts with workmen to repaint statues or mend the

roof. Everyone was involved, and indeed liable to Sir Christopher's censure if they failed to play their part.

The signs are that Morebath strongly resisted the reformation, and probably even sent some of its sons to take part in the rebellion against King Edward's Prayer Book in 1549, although it was generally obedient to royal commands. Certainly the church suffered financially. With images banished, the numerous small devotional gifts to the stores dried up, and with church ales also forbidden, there was no obvious source of revenue to purchase a bible and Erasmus' *Paraphrases*, let alone satisfy the increasing military requirements of Tudor government. Many of the forbidden Catholic objects were distributed amongst parishioners to avoid confiscation (and reworking into a gun or soldier's coat), and reappeared during what turned out to be the brief respite of Mary's reign. However, with the church close to bankruptcy, the High Warden Lucy Scely took the decision to sell off various items, and was not thanked for doing so.

By the time of Sir Christopher's death, fifteen years into Elizabeth's reign, Morebath had become reconciled to protestantism. Non-conformity meant treason, and was not an option. Sir Christopher celebrated communion at a table in the nave, using the Book of Common Prayer. He gave thanks to God when a bequest enabled the purchase of another Prayer Book – the bequest of the widow of a man who 35 years earlier had taken part in the Prayer Book rebellion.

However, as Duffy argued in his previous book, the parish emerged diminished from the experience. After years of rebellion, dire financial crisis, and hopes raised only to be dashed, they returned to peace and something like normality, but piety was not woven into the social fabric of parish life in the way it had been. The accounts are dominated by temporal or at best mundane concerns: the obligatory mending of the bridge on the parish boundary, or buying a new shovel for the sexton. The stores were no more, and bequests were limited to the standard 6/8d from wealthier parishioners for the privilege of a tomb within the church. Although the church and its energetic priest remained at the centre of parish affairs, the affairs were more to do with the state and business, and less to do with the hearts of parishioners. Women and the young lost their positions of responsibility and their focus for identity. Parish ales did return under Elizabeth, but the link between the social and the spiritual had been broken.

This book illustrates a kind of Christian spirituality remote from our own experience, and in doing so, it expands the realm of possibility. It shows a community relating to God, under all sorts of worldly pressures: the struggle to make ends meet, increasing pressure from the state, tensions and quarrels in a claustrophobic community, and thieves or dishonest workmen in whose hands the painstakingly gathered stores melt away.

emt 16/4/02