

## Book Reviews



Jeremy Morris, (2022) *A People's Church: A History of the Church of England*, London: Profile Books, xv + 464 pages. ISBN 9781781252499 (hbk), £30.

Another age would perhaps have called this splendid book *A People's History of the Church of England*. Jeremy Morris certainly fixes his hopes for an audience not on university courses and their students but on the private reader. That is certainly to be welcomed. The tone is inviting, even conversational, and the narrative itself poised, alert and open. Morris begins not with an Introduction but with a Preface offering a boldly provocative title, 'The Real History of the Church of England'. He is far too fine an historian to generalize lazily. If anything, he is more concerned to show how our images of the church of past centuries have often simplified and deceived when they should instead have acknowledged complexities, good or bad. Perhaps this is where the reality of his treatment lies.

The preceding Catholic centuries come across here in a kindly enough fashion and there is no great sense that the people very much wanted what they got in the Protestant Reformation. After all, the Catholic Church had been the people's church too. Now they got their Bible in English, but gone was that 'world of the imagination' (p. 10) in which the sacred had once lived and breathed so vividly, not least on the walls of the remote Chaldon church, in Surrey, England, where a vivid depiction of the Day of Judgement may still be seen, carefully restored and preserved by a later age. Thereafter, Morris carves his narrative into stout slices: 'The Age of the Monarch' (the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries); 'The Age of Oligarchy' (the eighteenth century); 'The Age of the People' (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). It is a story well told – and well-illustrated too. The Reformation of Henry VIII is nicely framed: 'You could call this a monstrous egotism', writes Morris, 'and it certainly looks like that' (p. 21). With Edward VI comes a Reformation 'on the move', but one 'only half completed' (p. 42). The Elizabethan Settlement turns out to settle rather little, for too many cats have been let out of too many bags.

As for the parishes where the people were to be found, carrying on as best they could, so much was now 'dismantled', 'reorganised' and 'reconceived' (but not 'reimagined', mercifully) in the great Tudor 'upending' of just about everything. It was now that something called Anglicanism was 'invented', achieving for this state church a theological identity, coherence and purpose, above all in the words of Jewel and Hooker and in that austere corporate statement, the Thirty-Nine Articles. When James I appears with his own 'union project' (uniting the thrones of Scotland and England), he comes as a 'meddler'; when Charles I follows there is a shift towards an 'ordered ceremonialism' and altars begin to move about. Of course, it all collapses with the Civil War and the new order sees uniformity replaced by what is, at best, a 'regional patchwork'. The result is not order but chaos. By 1660 there are only eight bishops left; the cathedrals have had a miserable time. The Restoration reinstitutes a good deal and brings a revised Prayer Book; 1688 marks a long step towards an acknowledged pluralism. The 'long' eighteenth century brings an 'age of oligarchy' and a time of both 'consolidation and turbulence'. Much that is virtuous is accomplished, though quietly. There appears Evangelicalism; in the same years an Anglican Enlightenment dawns. What now of 'the people'? They could no longer be coerced into church – or even, come to that, into behaving themselves. In the end, it is economic and social change that eventually overwhelms the great quest for a single, comprehensive church. The new gods of capitalism and industrialisation are matched by an explosion in the population and where the Church of England struggles Dissent prospers and breaks into still newer forms. It is Methodism that proves to be 'by far the most innovative product of Evangelicalism' (p. 179).

So it is the nineteenth century which finally brings 'the age of the people'. There is a decisive, and lasting, recasting of the Established Church by Parliament: religious diversity is now accepted, and Roman Catholics and Dissenters soon lose their disabilities; the Church of England itself is reformed and indeed much improved. The Oxford Movement materializes to invigorate Anglican theology and provoke many lively debates. Bitterly divisive, it is eloquent in the creation of new religious orders and communities, most of them small but conspicuous and almost all short-lived. Morris offers an analysis of the divisions of the industrial age, of class and gender, and the impression is not one of happiness. Moreover, he acknowledges the power of class and the vulgarity of snobbery. At all events, the people begin to sing far more: while there is a choral revival to gladden hearts there is in every Sunday service a rich profusion of psalm-settings, hymns and carols. While this is going on, theological liberalism integrates higher criticism, allows doubts and integrates them, almost comfortably, within a Broad Church. 'Liberals', Morris writes, 'did

not want to undermine the Church of England but to strengthen it, to expand it, to make it once again a church that could encompass all the people of England' (p. 284). Yet in an age of mass political parties, it was the Nonconformists who favoured the Liberal Party while the Church of the Establishment leaned conspicuously towards the Conservatives. Such a division is all too obviously suggestive. Above all, the Victorian Church had money and much of it was being given by a new, prosperous middle class which had embraced religion. Churches great and small were restored, beautified, Victorianised: we glimpse the cathedrals of St Albans (botched) and also the new spire of Chichester ('triumphant').

Late Victorian flourishing was nothing if not complicated, but something amidst all of this complexity was beginning to give way. Morris finds the Edwardian Church under 'an air, not of confidence, but of insecurity and apprehension' (p. 335). In this new age Archbishop William Temple would come to embody the vision of a church for all people in the progressive contexts of liberal democracy. But evidence that the people were disappearing from Sunday services was beginning to accumulate. If the two World Wars did not bring calamity, they hardly offered encouragement. The National Mission of 1916 only 'at best, slowed decline a little' (p. 340). The scene becomes more recognisable to us. Post First World War reforms bring the new representative Church Assembly, divided into its three Houses of Bishops, Clergy and Laity, but also despondency when the elected representatives of the people dash the new 1928 Prayer Book of the Church in Parliament. Morris turns to the parishes again only to find the local church there 'gradually being marginalised' (p. 346). In the war against Hitler the Blitz deprives London of many of its elegant churches and nearly destroys Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral (which is then photographed and reinterpreted as a symbol of national defiance). It is the 1960s that bring both pluralism and accelerating decline while immigration brings new textures to the local church and new congregations too. The anxiety that the language of Book of Common Prayer has become obscure to the people at large has not gone away: the liturgists are exceedingly busy, first with the cunningly entitled *Alternative Service Book 1980* and later with *Common Worship* (1999). Neither very much matter to the new congregations of charismatic evangelicals, ritualistically raising their hands, reading the texts of worship songs on large screens, and singing nothing that has been offered to them by the *New English Hymnal*. When women are ordained it does not bring catastrophe, as prophesied by its critics, but rather 'business as usual' (p. 368). Debates about human sexuality begin to encroach, but as Morris writes, 'It was clerical sexual relationships that were ... to bedevil the debate in the years to come' (p. 370). With declining numbers come declining finances. The new

dioceses which the Victorians created begin to fold up; parishes amalgamate, not occasionally but routinely and by design. The narrative of decline is hard to challenge and, evidently, impossible to resist.

Looking about him now, Morris is clearly doubtful as to what the Church of England has become, with the people or without them: 'It is no longer clearly a national church, and yet it has held on to the symbols and some of the institutions of one. It subsists as the strange paradox of an established Church in a secular State.' It comes as something of a shock when he briefly acknowledges its tendency to show 'a demonstrable bias towards the wealthy and powerful' (p. 376). Indeed, the relationship between Church and society is now one of 'dissonance'. The future of what Morris calls the 'big' Church of England looks, to say the least, doubtful. But a 'small', more 'mobile' church might yet hope for a future. The nature of such mobility is not altogether clear, but it would appear to contradict the assumption on which the entire parochial system rests: that most of the people live in the same place for much of their lives.

Had this ever been 'a people's church', after all? If it was so, why did so many of the people persistently escape out of the church door and turn up elsewhere? One might well begin to reflect on the social content of its essential principles. Was the relationship with the State too explicit to convince the sceptical, not least in an age, like the present, in which political institutions are suspected and resented? And what of episcopacy? Very much was staked upon in it, certainly, but the bishops were, for the most part, a disappointing lot. Even the kindly, conforming Walter Farquhar Hook, who laboured among the poor of Leeds before creating, by prodigious efforts, that new spire at Chichester which Morris so rightly praises, once remarked, 'If I had made high preferment my object, I have that mediocrity of talent which might have enabled me to obtain my end.' If very few geniuses were to be found in the bishop's palaces, and in the rectories and vicarages of the Church of England, was that because the church signally failed to realise, cultivate and incorporate whatever religious genius existed in the people? Did it even want them to do anything more than attend its services and give their money? Of the Church in 1852 Florence Nightingale famously wrote to Dean Stanley of Westminster: 'I would have given her my head, my hand, my heart. She would not have them. She did not know what to do with them.' If so many of the people preferred the chapels of Dissent and then of Nonconformity was it because they longed to be free to choose their ministers for themselves – indeed, to become ministers themselves – and to worship in other forms and in their own words? So much of Anglicanism was defined and determined by its clericalism. At least once Morris observes that

sense of frustration, indeed abrasion, which could emerge between the clergy and the laity. The ordination of women, when it came, arguably clericalized the church still more. And what, then, of music? The Anglican choral tradition was no doubt a glorious thing, but until the 1970s, at least, a woman who wished to sing in a church choir on a Sunday morning found her opportunities not here but in the Free Churches. At large, there is very much to show that the presumptions on which the Church of England rested disclosed a perfectly explicit ambivalence towards the people, and – more than that – a fear of what they might get up to if left unformed, unlicensed and unsupervised. Today's movement towards an increasingly brittle, defensive corporatism can only reinforce this. It is tempting to think that, as far as the Church of England is concerned, the Age of Oligarchy did not end with the long eighteenth century, but lives on, not least in the form of the Archbishops' Council. Indeed, perhaps the Long Eighteenth century is still going on? As for the Age of the People – they have gone.

Turning at last to the contemporary Church of England, Jeremy Morris concludes: 'It cannot any more pretend to be the people's Church – but it can continue to be a Church for the people' (p. 382). The sentence – and that word 'pretend', most of all – is more than suggestive of the doubts that lie beneath the surface of this lively narrative. Such a wise and liberally-minded book explains a great deal – though some will feel that it raises at least as many questions as it answers. If that so, the venture will have been more than justified.

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