Response to: "Community Conflict and the Collective Memory in the Late Medieval Parish Church"

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Since the publication of Eamon Duffy's 1992 "blockbuster" book *Stripping of the Altars*, the late medieval English parish has generated a great deal of interest. Drawing on a range of sources generated by the laity themselves, scholars have been able to argue that late medieval religious practice was neither moribund nor meaningless and that religious reform was more the result of Henry VIII's desire for a divorce than the populace's anti-clericalism and religious skepticism. With notions of community and community identity framing their research, Duffy and those who followed him argued for an engaged laity, who transformed their mandated parish participation into meaningful spiritual exercises. The parish and late medieval religious practice were vibrant and creative, with parishioners going well beyond the minimal requirements to maintain and furnish the nave.

For us in the first generation of scholars studying the parish, our notions of community grew out of the theological underpinning of the Eucharist and the interconnectedness of medieval notions of charity and community. In rehabilitating the late medieval parish from a historiography that understood late medieval religion at worst as corrupt and at best as static, we might have been overly optimistic about the parish's functionality. Bain's article takes a different approach by looking at the role of violence in community-identity formation. She focuses on a type of parish where religious practice, geography, and status all come together to illuminate one aspect of community formation. Across England, about 200 parishes shared their churches with a monastic community. The origins and details of the arrangements varied from community to community, but proximity combined with differences in wealth, liturgy, and life-style created friction and tension that periodically erupted into violence. While the parishioners in the two case studies that Bain examines are by no means

unique in their occasional antipathy to the situation, Bain's close examination of Wymondham, Norfolk and Sherbourne, Dorset shows how these conflicts compelled parishioners to articulate an identity and how these conflicts continue to influence these parishes over time.

Space and place have been important analytical tools for thinking about parish identity, but Bain's analysis of these two conflicts makes them dynamic issues rather than simply theoretical concepts. In Wymondham, the parishioners lost access to their bell tower, an important means of communication and an audible reminder of the different liturgical lives the laity and the monks led. Bells figured in a number of disputes, such as the one between the monks and parishioners in Dunster, Somerset, who also shared a church, and in Bath, Somerset, where one parish's bell-ringing schedule interrupted the nearby cathedral's bell-ringing schedule. In Sherborne, the issue was access to the font. This too had powerful symbolic importance, as the font was central to defining a parish as a parish rather than a chapel. Parishioners attending out-of-the-way chapels routinely petitioned their bishop or even the pope for permission to install a font and to elevate their chapel to parish status. One point Bain might also note is that baptisms not only were a source of revenue for whoever controlled the vicarage, but they also were a tangible sign of the laity's non-celibate life-style and the presence of women in the church. In taking on the monks, the laity in both parishes had to articulate to themselves a set unifying ideas and values. While some of these ideas might have been opportunistic, others grew out of the demands and dictates of the institutional Church that the laity maintain and supply the nave, and attend weekly services. These requirements necessitated lay organization that created awareness of the parish as a unit capable of addressing corporate desires.

Bain pushes her analysis of the importance of community identity beyond the Middle Ages by looking at how the contemporary parishioners of Wymondham and Sherborne interpret the past conflicts and use them to construct and maintain their own sense of community today. Bain's work thus recognizes the ways that living among antiquities can continually inform the present, despite

new technologies or changing social realities. Antiquarian accounts of the conflicts and Bain's own ethnographic fieldwork reveal two very different uses of the medieval conflicts. In Wymondham, the conflict still serves as a powerful unifying force. It was invoked to guide building restoration in the early twentieth century, and continues to justify current behavior, serving as an explanation for local political opinions. The veracity of the version at play is less of a concern than the fact of it as a memory as an organizing principle. In Sherborne, however, current versions of Sherborn's conflict fail to unite the community around the earlier parishioners' actions. Memories of that conflict were detached from the parishioners when they demolished their original church after the Dissolution and took over the monks' much grander church. The conflict plays little role in current community concerns, but is simply a way of explaining the church's architectural peculiarities.

Bain's research points to the ways in which current local politics shape which versions of these medieval conflicts are remembered. This issue is not without its consequences. In framing current restoration issues around the historical conflict with the monks, Wymondham still draws distinctions between who belongs to the community and who does not, although with the monks defined as corrupt and now long-dead, their othering seems benign. In disconnecting the conflict from their present, Sherborne may underappreciate the ways in which their parish appropriated their current church, but their version lacks the othering gestures that are explicitly part of defining who belongs to a community and who does not. While the church is a "totem of tradition and continuity," it is a continuity of architecture and scenery, not people and passions.