Veiled Assent, Hidden Dissension: Moments of Definition, Redefinition and Transition in the English Parish Church 1500-1700

Jude Jones

Looking at the moment is an enormously difficult task. Which moment is it exactly? How long does it last? Does it occur as a point in time synchronously or is it the product of a more diachronic synthesis – the distillation of a series of moments of existence? Is it the point at which everyone still remaining in Pompeii was overcome by the fumes from the eruption pouring down from Vesuvius? Or did it last from the point at which the volcano started to erupt until the minute of the last Pompeian's death? Could that moment include the thick showers of ash which covered the dying, burying them under deep strata? Might it even include the long aeons of time until they were discovered and reconstructed from the remains left in the consolidated ash? How long is a moment?

Archaeologists are taught to see time as either synchronic or diachronic: seemingly momentary events like the eruption of Vesuvius or long term slabs of time. We often present time in binary oppositions – the short which equals change and the long which equals continuity. Thus, is the question of how long a moment lasts better left to expert philosophers, or is it possible to quantify the length of a moment then perhaps to qualify it? Or, better still, is it possible to try to characterise and define the idea of the moment by examining its constituents and its impact? To this end, it might be worth contextualising a short series of past moments to see how long they lasted and who and what was engaged in them as they occurred. And, while it may not be possible to see into the psyches of those engaged in them, it is quite feasible to look at the remnants of those moments for signs of meaning, for points of definition and of redefinition.

My research, as a historical archaeologist, is directed towards an evaluation of what can be seen of the religious identity and performance of Early Modern rural communities along the borders of West Sussex and Hampshire. I am, therefore, researching parishes and their parishioners and the churches which stood at the centres of those parishes. I am also focusing on a period of remarkable religious flux which, in two centuries, included a Reformation and Counter Reformation, a counter Counter-Reformation, an Arminian episode, a Civil War culminating in a Commonwealth Puritan ethic which abolished bishoprics, followed by an Episcopal, more pro-Catholic Restoration and a Glorious Revolution which redefined state Protestantism as anti-Catholic.

Against all of these religious realignments sit the groups of medieval parish churches sited across the coastal and Downland regions of the West Sussex/Hampshire border. These groups are discussed in architectural guides and commentaries as exemplars of unchanging religious tradition and cultural stasis, as if all this turmoil has entirely passed them by. One of the most frequently used geographical directories is Pevsner's *Buildings of England*; each of its volumes is dedicated to a county. By the time Pevsner had begun to write up the county of Sussex in 1965, he was tired from his exertions and so asked Ian Nairn to help him by covering West Sussex. Below is Ian Nairn's response to the very secluded Downland church of St Michael's and All Angels at Up Marden, six miles north of Chichester:

> At Up Marden the atmosphere is as tangible as any moulding, the slow, loving gentle accretion century by century until it is something as organic as any of the South Down views around it . . . (It must be seen) as a visible loving testimony of the faith of succeeding generations.[1]

Thirty years later, Simon Jenkins's church guide shares a similar opinion:

> The brick floor, box pews and wooden benches are a study in tranquillity . . . On a summer evening we can imagine ancient peasants climbing from the fields below to find comfort and hope of salvation in their place of holiness.[2]

Nairn and Jenkins's observations are sited firmly in the idea that isolation and quietness are indicators of continuity and stability. Here, it appears that the retired nature of the church itself, which is situated down a cart track and accessed through a gap between two decaying farm buildings, is testament to the kind of

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[1] Quoted in N. Pevsner & I. Nairn, *Buildings of England – Sussex* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), pp. 269-70.
[2] S. Jenkins, *England's Thousands Best Churches* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 700.

Romantic attitude evoked in Thomas Gray's poem, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750). This attitude is remarkably long lived and, even now, deeply embedded in the modern psyche.[3] It assumes that rural parishioners were apathetic, faceless, and only desirous of the maintenance of tradition and the unchanging cycles of the agricultural calendar:

> Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife
> Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
> Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
> They kept the noiseless tenour of their way.[4]

But is this good enough? With this kind of blanket view there is no possibility of any glimpsed moment other than that of the generic ploughman plodding home on his weary way. We need to ask whether it is feasible to follow the ploughman home and meet his wife. Can we put any flesh on this seemingly impossible problem? If we can, might we even interrogate the Ploughman family's religious beliefs?

Looking From the Top Down

In order to approach this task, I intend to use a wide angled lens and progressively focus down onto the series of parishes which make up North Marden, East Marden, Up Marden and Compton – the last two being parishes which were conjoined and treated as a unit from the seventeenth century onwards. These were a closely knit quartet whose parishioners over many centuries were tied together by bonds of intermarriage, land-ownership and sociality. The border area that I am studying includes the coastal parishes around Chichester in the east to Titchfield in the west. It then runs up into the Downland around the Meons and Petersfield in the west and Elsted and the Dean valley in the east. From the sixteenth century onwards this area was studded with recusants of all social classes.[5] The grand Catholic families included members of the Wriothesleys, Earls of Southampton at Titchfield, the Cotton family at Warblington Castle, the Carylls of South Harting, the Poles at Lordington, and the Fitzalans and Lumleys at Stansted Park. An elite Catholic household employed Catholic servants and their manorial tenants and dependents often shared the religious complexion of their landlords. Besides these, the Presentation Records for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveal a durable and stubborn adherence of some ordinary villagers to Catholicism – a fidelity which occasionally culminated in official Anglican excommunication.[6] This landscape, far from showing evidence of sleepy religious conformity, is one which unevenly supported large patches of resistance. The great recusant families provided networks of support for each other which reached down through the gentry and yeoman classes to labourers, so that up until the Civil War at least, it is quite valid to characterise this area of the South as one in which two contesting religious factions are sitting rather equivocally side by side.

As many of the churchyards reveal, this adherence to Catholicism was present well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the late seventeenth century the purchase of gravestones became increasingly desirable as a mortuary requisite for those with sufficient social clout and wealth. Catholic gravestones invariably carry incised crucifixes and the letters 'RIP' to differentiate them from Protestant ones.[7] As Catholics rarely had their own graveyards, it was commonplace to inter them either in an area set aside in the parish churchyard or simply amidst the other graves. Since many Catholic families managed to avoid excommunication and fines by attending the parish church, their standing within a rural community might be religiously ambivalent.[8] It is conceivable that their neighbours were aware of their religious differences, but might have regarded these differences as less important than the maintenance of communal sociality. This is supported by the existence and location of large numbers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Catholic headstones which are especially prevalent in coastal churchyards such as Hayling Island, Havant, Bedhampton, Bosham, Chidham, Westbourne and Warblington – a churchyard with one of the best collections of mixed eighteenth-century gravestones in the country.[9]

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[3] For extended discussion, see M. Johnson, *Ideas of Landscape* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
[4] Quoted in P. Smith (ed.), *101 Best-Loved Poems* (New York: Dover Publishers, 1995), p. 28.
[5] In the history of England and Wales, Recusancy refers to those who refused to attend Anglican services.
[6] Presentation Records were indictments made by churchwardens or parsons to the local Episcopal courts naming parishioners considered guilty of moral or religious delinquencies.
[7] P. Coppin, *101 Medieval Churches of West Sussex* (East Sussex: SB Publications, 2006), pp. 46-48.
[8] D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual Religion and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 400-403.
[9] See J. Draper, *Hampshire: The Complete Guide* (Winchester: Dovecote Press, 1990), p. 193 and N. Pevsner & D. Lloyd, *The Buildings of England: Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 641.

From this mortuary picture we derive an impression of broad social tolerance, at least in terms of death rituals. Inland, however, gravestone distribution is much more problematic. Many of the Downland churches have heavily altered, curtailed or expanded churchyards. The eighteenth-century gravestones, which are prolific further south, are much rarer and there are hardly any with Catholic iconography. This may be due to a number of factors: the Victorians were obsessively tidy and many of these Downland churches were formidably tidied both inside and out; rural parishes were less prone to changes in mortuary fashions and fewer headstones were commissioned up country by people in general; or the weather and climate may have eroded the headstones. However, it may be worth considering that the devotees of Catholicism and state Protestantism had a more complicated living relationship up on the Downs, resulting in more anonymous burial rites. Scaling this overview down somewhat will enable us to look for context, which will support my theory.

Looking from the Bottom Up

First, it is necessary to look at some more evidence from the Presentation Records, as they apply to the Marden parishes. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries this whole area was seeded with the tenants and connections of several influential Catholic landowning families, so there was a strong Catholic influence existing amidst a more conformist population. A number of local gentry families were also caught up in this web of religious inter-relationship and became pivotal focuses for dissent.[10] In the late sixteenth century the Barwick gentry family of Compton and Upmarden bought the advowson and impropriation of the rectory of Compton with Upmarden and the chapelry of West Marden, which entitled them to the receipt of tithes.

Richard Barwick was himself vicar of this parish from 1575 to 1619, although his older brother, Curtis (the head of the family), together with other family members were frequently presented by the churchwardens as recusants. The sort of stresses contained in these contradictory relationships show themselves not only in documents but in the post-Reformation archaeology of the church of St Michael's in Upmarden. Since the cost of repairing the fabric of the church was divided between the parson who repaired the chancel and the congregation and patrons who maintained the nave, it is evident that the Barwick family as a whole were expected to cover most of the costs. As bequests were no longer being made to churches, during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries churches and their parsonages began to decay at an alarming rate. Churches themselves had been heavily adapted since the Reformation to realign their internal architecture to simpler, inclusive Protestant forms. In structural terms, chancel arches were sometimes taken out, floors levelled throughout the body of the church and rood screens removed.[11] These changes reduced the mechanisms of separation designed to distinguish priest from parishioner, but they could also materially weaken the integrity of the building.

In St Michael's case, the chancel arch began to subside and, during the late sixteenth century, was repaired with a second infilling arch, buttressing the original with a much narrower opening which reused ancient voussoirs, imposts and other masonry. It is thought that this infill was Saxon stone work which came from an old chapel at West Marden taken down in the 1580s.[12] Fragments of paint, however, were uncovered in the twentieth century and are still visible. This evidence suggests that, after the arch had been erected in St Michael's, its western side was painted with religious iconography, This series of alterations thus demonstrates marked opposition to the ecclesiastical architectural canons of the day which directed that all religious paintings must be whitewashed, and chancels – far from being made more enclosed – needed to be opened up. In fact, this suggests an episodic moment, perhaps strongly orchestrated by both Richard Barwick, the parish priest, and his brother, Curtis Barwick, the church's patron, where the body of the church was deliberately reconstituted in a heightened Catholic form to reflect their hostility to the Protestant architectural orthodoxies of the time.

Whether the rest of the congregation agreed either with the architectural changes demanded by state religion or those of the Barwicks is not recorded. However, we can see that the fabric of the church itself and the reconstitution of its internal spaces were being used as material for the scoring of politico-religious points. These are tangible moments of revolt and dissent veiled by the tacit agreement or indifference of the rest of the parish.

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[10] See A. Fletcher, *A Country Community in Peace and War: Sussex 1600-1660* (London: Longman, 1975).
[11] For an account of both structural and material changes to Elizabethan churches, see M. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 294-392.
[12] See C. Bacon, *The Church of St Michael's and All Angels, Up Marden* (Up Marden: Up Marden Church, 1990).

Interior of St Michael and All Angels, Up Marden, West Sussex. View from the west looking towards the chancel with its sixteenth-century in-filled chancel arch buttressing a thirteenth-century one. Also, note fragments of surviving wall painting on the north eastern face of the infilled arch. Photograph – Author 2009.

The end of Richard's incumbency saw the end of any common ground between patron and parson. After 1619 the new vicar, Anthony Gray, became involved in a head to head battle with the Barwicks, not just over the state of St Michael's but also over the state of St Mary's at Compton, together with their church houses (Curtis and his son Roger as impropriators were liable to foot the bill for most of the repairs). For five consecutive years, the Barwicks were not only accused of Recusancy but were also liable for failing to maintain the church buildings at all. Gray's testimony, as one complaint succeeds another, becomes increasingly intense:

> I present Roger Barwick, improprietory of the parsonage of Upmarden for suffering the chancel there to be so farr gone to ruyne that unless speedy order bee taken to compel him to repaire the same it is likely in short tyme to fall downe . . . We present that the church of Upmarden is not sufficiently covered, healed and repaired by reason whereof the church is made so loathsome and filthy with the dung of pigeons that the parishioners are not able to sitt to hear divine service, so that some of them to heare the same, resort to other churches.[13]

At the same time, Barwick's farm animals were invading the churchyard, knocking the fences down and creating havoc amongst the graves. Finally, in 1625, Gray succeeded in getting his chief patron excommunicated. These quarrels may well have sprung from a clash of personalities but are also evidence of a long-lasting ideological feud. It is even possible to speculate that the hostilities might have been sparked off by Gray's decision to whitewash over the chancel wall – an act of conformity which his Bishop would have been eager for him to carry out. Certainly such quarrels would have severely disrupted parish harmony and probably have split the parishioners into religious factions. A picture emerges of Gray in his derelict pulpit, under a leaking roof, preaching hellfire sermons directed against his absent patrons while below him, in their box pews, a reduced and resentful audience of parishioners stop their noses with pungent herbs and flowers in a vain effort to obliterate the putrid smell of pigeon droppings.
Alongside these troubled episodes, Protestant farming families are visible – doggedly putting up with all these rows, perhaps complaining or perhaps veiling their true opinions about the status quo and taking their turn as village elders to perform their duty as churchwardens or overseers of the poor. The Jenman family of East and North Marden, for example, emerge from the mid sixteenth century as yeoman farmers

[13] H. Johnstone (ed.), *Churchwardens Presentments Part One: Archdeaconry of Chichester Volume XLIX* (Lewes: Sussex Record Society, 1949).

and churchwardens. A churchwarden's tasks are central to the religious community but also repetitive. They include helping to maintain their churches, levying taxes, doling out poor relief, ensuring a decent supply of communion bread and wine, arranging for the laundry of their vicar's vestments and journeying regularly to the diocesan centre to attend the Episcopal courts. They are the 'presenters' rather than the 'presented' – a type of moral and spiritual policeman. They conform in a myriad of ways; each task defining a fraction of a composite role and underlining the agency of that role and its central importance in terms of parish religious practice. A churchwarden's agreement with whatever religious complexion state liturgy requires is a given, and so one can only see his agency in archaeological terms. In East Marden, for example, St Peter's solid flint and brick seventeenth-century south porch is testament to the work put in the early 1660s by four churchwardens, one of whom was William Jenman. The Jenman family – mobile, active and visible over generations through such material as Churchwarden's accounts, parish registers, Protestation records and their own tombstones – provide micro-histories as representatives of the otherwise nameless villagers who had to negotiate their own religious way between the strident controversies of their social superiors.

Between the Top and Bottom – Peering into the Middle

The rapid quick-fire changes of the religious establishments of the sixteenth century operated on many levels, both on those who were ready to accept them and those who refused. It is possible, in retrospect, to identify these momentary, condensed instances of revolt. Here the moment at which religious iconography was applied to Upmarden's chancel arch was followed by longer, equally intense and acrimonious moments of religious dissension between the Barwick gentry and their minister, Anthony Gray. It may be that these moments enabled individual parishioners to define their own views, perhaps in terms of with whom they most disagreed.

Interestingly, by the 1630s, the Barwicks appear to have been reabsorbed into the religious community and were acting as churchwardens themselves. One might speculate that they had over-reached themselves and alienated too many neighbours. But Catholicism, as a strong religious force, held its place on both sides of the border well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Upmarden alone there were twelve adult Catholics in 1679 and six Catholic families in 1724.[14]

The churchyards around are largely devoid of Catholic gravestones, though. It may be that the spasms which these religious controversies created ran deeper than Presentation Records or churchwarden's accounts are able to reveal. The Civil War, which powerfully polarised religious opinion in both counties, undoubtedly added to the trauma that Downland communities had been experiencing since the Reformation. By the early eighteenth century, therefore, it may have been more comforting or diplomatic to bury members of the community beside each other without any overt differentiating sign of religious identity.

It seems most unlikely that there were long years of undisturbed rural peace and tranquillity in this locale, or at least not in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ploughman family worked themselves into states of exhaustion at points during the agricultural year, but to expect them to refrain from religious or cultural opinion, or not to side with one faction or another and not to take to heart the damage and constant ideological redefinition the times demanded, is to expect too much. Or is it perhaps to expect far too little? I suspect the current residents of Upmarden live much more peacefully than their predecessors did.

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[14] Ibid.

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Author Biography

Jude Jones is a mature student currently in the second year of her PhD in archaeology, and this year she has been a part-time lecturer in anthropology. Her thesis centres on interpretations of religious identity shown in the material culture and landscapes of Early Modern parish churches along the Hampshire and West Sussex border. Although this paper explores matters of religious subtext, Jude is also particularly interested in issues of space and gender which are emerging from her research.