Parish Churches in the Early Modern World – An Afterword

*Beat Kümin*

The first feature likely to strike readers of this collection is its confessional, social and regional range. They will find essays about Anglican, Calvinist, Catholic, Lutheran, Unitarian and Zwinglian contexts; discussions of nobles, burghers, country people and slaves; and contributions focusing on northwestern / central / eastern Europe, southern parts of Asia and Latin America. The arguments are supported with over eighty illustrations and the volume as a whole is fittingly dedicated to a scholar who would have loved to engage with new works at the intersection of religious, political and cultural history over the course of the ‘long’ Reformation.[[1]](#footnote-1) A second impressive aspect is the editorial achievement, not only in assembling this international group of authors, but also of making the field of comparative parish church studies very much his own over the last decade. Alongside anthologies on sacred space, a monograph on Calvinist places of worship and a collaborative research project on ‘The Early Modern Parish Church and the Religious Landscape’, he took charge of a collection on Lutheran churches before widening the horizon to Catholicism and colonial perspectives in this latest venture.[[2]](#footnote-2) His initiatives form part of a general surge in parish studies (in the broadest sense of the term) reflected in numerous conferences and regional / national / thematic surveys, but as yet no European-wide (not to speak of global) synthesis.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many regions remain relatively dark corners, at least in Anglophone scholarship, among which surprisingly Dutch and Italian cities, so the essays on Ghent and Milan are particularly welcome. Looking at early modern historiography as a whole, many contributions chime with recent priorities such as spatial approaches and the ever-expanding ‘cultural turn’. The resulting picture, as Susan Karant-Nunn has stressed in a previous comment, reveals parish churches as anything but static and homogeneous entities; much rather, they were in dynamic evolution, constantly interacting with idiosyncratic ecclesiastical, political and economic frameworks to produce distinctly local varieties of sacred space.[[4]](#footnote-4)

These brief remarks cannot do justice to the richness of insights emerging from the preceding pages. Out of the multitude of possible thematic strands (some of which – like architectural styles/peculiarities, links to local memory and inter-denominational relations – are addressed in the ‘Introduction’), three shall be examined a little more closely here: the roles of parish churches in the formation of confessional identities, overseas mission and the ‘secular’ world around them. While the first two relate to the specifically *early modern* diversification of the religious landscape and colonial expansion in both Asia and America, the last one transcends all periods and locales. Parish churches, after all, formed one of the most tangible points of intersection between the physical and metaphysical worlds.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In many ways, of course, the moulding of religious *identities* forms the *raison d’être* of any place of worship. To convey the Christian message, to bind individuals to the Church and to deliver the necessary aids to salvation required a multitude of local ‘access points’. From around the first millennium, this network started to take shape in Europe. In many parts (although certainly not all), it was virtually complete by 1300. A key moment of parish consolidation came in 1215, when the Fourth Lateran Council enshrined the duty of annual confession and communion in canon law.[[6]](#footnote-6) Subsequently, contemporaries experienced a substantial ‘increase of divine service’ (exemplified by a surge in chantry / fraternity foundations) and a great wave of ‘rebuilding’ and decorative elaboration. To this day, the English landscape remains punctuated by thousands of religious edifices constructed in the specific late Gothic (‘perpendicular’) style of the late Middle Ages.[[7]](#footnote-7) From the sixteenth century, as many of our authors underline, reformers felt that the proliferation of devotions had gone too far. In Catholic towns and villages, bishops and priests made energetic efforts to re-emphasize the parish’s pre-eminence in religious life; hence the ‘re-sanctification’ of chapel space in Milan’s S. Nazaro and the emergence of parish closes as new processional theatres right across Brittany.[[8]](#footnote-8) Even on the Protestant side, where early voices had located the sacred in congregations of the faithful (rather than physical sites), practical considerations and fears of ungodly contaminations encouraged the adaptation rather than abandonment of existing buildings. Particularly complex re-orderings occurred in early modern England: after a first attack on the cult of images under Henry VIII and a radical Calvinist ‘stripping of the altars’ in Edward VI’s reign, his half-sister Mary restored Catholicism in the mid-1550s. The Elizabethan settlement favoured a moderate form of Protestantism (insisting, for example, on the wearing of vestments), followed by greater attention to the ‘beauty of holiness’ (including the railing of altars) during the early Stuart period. The latter fuelled iconoclastic reactions in the Puritan Revolution of the 1640s, which in turn gave way to a (high) Anglican framework for divine service after the restoration of the monarchy.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thinking about the ideal arrangement for Lutheran worship, Joseph Furttenbach devised his ingenious *Prinzipalstück*, i.e. a single focal point for baptism, communion, preaching and organ accompaniment visible from any place in the church. Many German and Scandinavian communities took inspiration from his proposals, but always in ways which suited their particular needs and settings.[[10]](#footnote-10) The same point is made for other regional contexts, e.g. regarding the curious absence of fonts in parts of the Swiss *Romandie* (in marked contrast to the Zwinglian heartlands of Zurich), the long and narrow naves of early Anglican churches in Virginia or the elaborate (and often syncretic) decorations in Hispanic America.[[11]](#footnote-11) The division into a larger lay part and a predominantly clerical section (nave vs chancel/choir) seems to be among the very few near-universal features of parish churches. Does this mean that layout details and furnishings counted as *adiaphora*, things indifferent? Irenic figures like Melanchthon tended to agree, but not embattled minorities in the diaspora; for Transylvanian Lutherans, such features became fundamental signs of confessional distinction.[[12]](#footnote-12) Importantly, however, the essays also point to inputs into broader, trans-confessional identities. *Simultankirchen*, where Protestants and Catholics shared the same places of worship, eventually contributed to a grudging acceptance of religious co-existence in the Holy Roman Empire.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the Dutch Republic, the ‘official’ Calvinist Church failed to integrate the entire population. Many burghers and peasants stayed well clear of its stern discipline (and thus the Lord’s Supper), but they *did* feel affected when it came to matters like ‘civil’ registration (baptism, burial), forced alterations of the ecclesiastical topography (as at Ghent in 1539), the administration of communal resources (Holy Ghost charities, fabric funds) or the election of parish officers (like ministers or churchwardens).[[14]](#footnote-14)

The *extra-European contributions* open fascinating new perspectives. Much remains to be investigated, of course, but a first feature to note is the prominence of monks and friars. Mendicants had supplemented parochial provision since their medieval origins, but assumed a much more fundamental role in overseas mission. In Brazil, lay elites sought close association with the Franciscans as Tertiaries, supporting dedicated chapels, extensive works of charity and lavish post-mortem provision (in one case amounting to 120,000 masses!); in Goa, the ‘Rome of the Orient’, entire geographical districts were entrusted to the care of particular orders: Bardez to the Franciscans, Salcete to the Jesuits, Divar and Chorão to the Jesuits and Dominicans, who then erected the first permanent places of worship with the financial support of local communities.[[15]](#footnote-15) In line with European precedents (at Regensburg in Germany on the eve of the Reformation, a synagogue was superseded by a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, whose miracles soon attracted thousands of pilgrims[[16]](#footnote-16)), priests and colonial powers liked to choose sites already ‘sanctified’ by indigenous societies. Apart from tapping into acknowledged repositories of metaphysical power, such transfers also symbolized the triumph of a specific Christian denomination over traditional cults. Commercial considerations, however, could inspire more lenient attitudes. In Batavia, where economic prospects depended on trade with members of other faiths, the Dutch East India Company tolerated alternatives to official Calvinist places of worship.[[17]](#footnote-17) From a comparative angle, furthermore, the parish system as such was subject to major regional variations: in Portuguese territories, the target appears to have been a universal network much like in Catholic Europe, while Dutch Asia leaned towards ‘gathered churches’ and differentiated provision for each social / linguistic group, prompting some local observers to detect a lack of missionary zeal.[[18]](#footnote-18) Just what fully-equipped and well-staffed parish churches could achieve emerges from Redden’s evocative account for Hispanic America. As centres of intense devotion, access points for sacraments and destinations of elaborate processions, these buildings acted like lighthouses in a sea of darkness, emitting divine grace into the surrounding countryside and providing stunned audiences with glimpses of a ‘terrestrial paradise’. The first provincial council of Goa, too, declared in 1567 ‘that an excellent way of bringing the Christian message to non-Christians is to build churches in their midst’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this respect, perhaps, the volume’s emphasis lies on missionary endeavours and achievements, less on the resentment of (and tensions with) indigenous societies. This is entirely legitimate given its principal purpose, but references to Jesuit martyrs and iconoclastic attacks remind us that these processes were far from harmonious and the costs to all sides often extremely high.

It is universally accepted that medieval parish churches served as community hubs not just in the religious but also *secular sphere*. English evidence includes the management of landed property, the co-ordination of public works and the staging of convivial events, most notably ‘church ales’ with locally-brewed beverages and musical entertainments.[[20]](#footnote-20) The early modern master narrative is one of increasing disentanglement from such profane distractions, at least in terms of clerical intent and official regulation. In practice, as this collection strongly underlines, the picture is rather more complicated.[[21]](#footnote-21) We have touched on material, financial and civic continuities in the Dutch Republic and should add the enduring influence of political bodies: in Cluj, the town council pushed its own religious agenda just as strongly as German magistrates throughout the long Reformation (even though the latter would have been horrified at the Anti-Trinitarian orientation of their colleagues).[[22]](#footnote-22) Another long-term link is the reflection of social hierarchies. In Milan, archbishop Borromeo had to fight hard to contain the nobility’s appropriation of entire parts of parish churches and, nearly everywhere, local elites expected prominent seating near, if not actually in, the chancel.[[23]](#footnote-23) A particularly marked differentiation evolved in Brazil: the parish proper catered above all for lower and middling groups, while the very top (Tertiaries) and bottom layers (black slaves) congregated around separate chapels or altars.[[24]](#footnote-24) In virtually all colonial contexts, furthermore, churches served as symbols of European and Christian power, built to impress indigenous populations through their sheer numbers, size and lavish ornamentation.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Readers thus have much to gain from a perusal of this collection. Where can parish church studies go from here? A lot, of course, depends on the sources. Some of the regions discussed here benefit from extensive archival survival of multiple genres, others (like Transylvania) are rather more sparsely documented. Even in the former, the move from architectural and stylistic analysis to social use and parishioner experience remains challenging. A rewarding path might be closer engagement with disciplines such as archaeology and material culture studies, field which have flourished in recent years.[[26]](#footnote-26) In order to fully assess the relative significance of parish churches, it would also be helpful to extend the perspective not just to further regions, but other ‘social sites’ in early modern communities: how does the importance of ecclesiastical buildings compare to, say, market squares, town halls or public houses?[[27]](#footnote-27) The answer is likely to depend on a lot of variables like location, season and confessional frameworks, while revealing numerous synergies and interactions at the same time. Finally, building on the point about churches as representations of colonial power, should they be recognized as one the most prominent symbols of ‘Europeanness’ in the premodern period? If the Reformations marked the demise of medieval (and relatively homogenous) Western ‘Christendom’ and the emergence of an explicit self-perception of the Continent as ‘Europe’ (partly defined by fragmentation and confessional strife),[[28]](#footnote-28) then their further investigation would indeed be anything but a ‘parochial’ task.

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1. Following doctoral research on the German Palatinate, Trevor Johnson’s interests expanded in similar directions, see e.g. ‘Gardening for God: Carmelite deserts and the sacralisation of natural space in Counter-Reformation Spain’, in: W. Coster and A. Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005), 193-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A. Spicer and S. Hamilton (eds), Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe (Aldershot, 2005); Coster and Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space*; A. Spicer, Calvinist Churches in Early Modern Europe (Manchester, 2007); idem (ed.), *Lutheran Churches in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Examples include M. Aubrun, *La paroisse en France des origines au XVe siècle* (Paris, 1986); A. Paravicini Bagliani and V. Pasche (eds), *La parrocchia nel medio evo: economia, scambi, solidarietà* (Rome, 1995); K. French, G. Gibbs and B. Kümin (eds), *The Parish in English Life 1400-1600* (Manchester, 1997); N. J. G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish* (Cambridge, 2000); B. Kümin (ed.), *Landgemeinde und Kirche im Zeitalter der Konfessionen* (Zurich, 2004); C. Burgess and E. Duffy (eds), *The Parish in Late Medieval England* (Donington, 2006); N. Kruppa (ed.), *Pfarreien im Mittelalter: Deutschland, Polen, Tschechien und Ungarn im Vergleich* (Göttingen, 2008); D. Dyas (ed.), *The English Parish Church through the Centuries* (interactive DVD, York, 2010); A. Bonzon, P. Guignet and M. Venard (eds), *La paroisse urbaine: du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris, 2014); P. Cozzo, Andate in pace: Parroci e parrocchie in Italia dal Concilio di Trento a papa Francesco (Rome, 2014); for further information on publications, projects and sources see the online research platform <http://my-parish.org> (accessed 30 January 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Susan C. Karant-Nunn, ‘Afterword’, in Spicer (ed.), *Lutheran Churches*, 483-92; cf. S. Rau and G. Schwerhoff (eds), *Topographien des Sakralen: Religion und Raumordnung in der Vormoderne* (München, 2008) and most recently P. Stock (ed.), *The Uses of Space in Early Modern History* (Basingstoke, 2015); P. Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In what follows, the essays in this volume will be referred to by their authors’ surname. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ‘The Canons of the Fourth Lateran Council’ (1215), no. 21, in: Internet History Sourcebook ˂http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp˃ (accessed 29 January 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A seminal study for England is C. Burgess, ‘“For the increase of divine service”: chantries in the parish in late medieval Bristol’, Journal of Ecclesiastical History 36 (1985), 46-65; see also the ingenious 3-D modelling of architectural developments in Dyas (ed.), *Parish Church*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Woodcock and Tingle. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England* c*.1400-*c*.1580* (2nd edn, New Haven, 2005); R. Whiting, *The Reformation of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge, 2010); K. Fincham and N. Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship 1547-* c*.1700* (Oxford, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Fisher Gray. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Spicer, ‘Parish Temples’; Lounsbury; Redden. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alongside religious art, vestments, the celebration of the Eucharist and other indicators: Wetter. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Spicer, ‘Introduction’; cf. B. J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge MA, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Van Bruaene; Nobel. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cavalcanti Filho; Kumbera Landrus. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The phenomenon, emphatically denounced by Martin Luther, is documented in a woodcut by Michael Ostendorfer (*c*. 1520): <http://www.wga.hu/html_m/o/ostendor/pilgrima.html> (accessed 29 January 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kumbera Landrus; Spicer, ‘Dutch churches’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cavalcanti Filho; Spicer, ‘Dutch churches’. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cited by Kumbera Landrus. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford, 1994); B. Kümin, ‘The secular legacy of the late medieval English parish’, in: Burgess and Duffy (eds), *Parish*, 95-111. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Tingle highlights the limits of Counter-Reformation efforts to keep the church ‘holy’ in Brittany; cf. the essays in Coster and Spicer (eds), *Sacred Space*. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Van Bruaene; Nobel; Crặciun. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Woodcock; Fisher Gray. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In the latter case typically dedicated to SS Benedito and Efigênia: Cavalcanti Filho. To what extent elites withdrew from the parish has been a point of debate elsewhere: see e.g. C. Carpenter, ‘The religion of the gentry of fifteenth-century England’, in: D. Williams (ed.), *England in the Fifteenth Century* (Woodbridge, 1987), 53-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Redden; Kumbera Landrus; Spicer, ‘Dutch churches’. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. D. Gaimster and R. Gilchrist (eds), *The Archaeology of Reformation 1480-1580* (Leeds, 2003); M. Mochizuki,The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm, 1566-1672. Material Religion in the Dutch Golden Age (Farnham, 2008); T. Hamling and C, Richardson (eds), Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture (Farnham, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See e.g. R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power: The Town Hall and the English Urban Community* c*. 1500-1640* (Oxford, 1991); D. Calabi, *The Market and the City: Squares, Streets and Buildings in the Early Modern City* (Aldershot, 2003); T. Brennan (gen. ed.), *Public Drinking in the Early Modern World: Voices from the Tavern* (4 vols, London, 2011). On the concept of ‘social sites’: J. C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990), esp. ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. M. Greengrass, *Christendom Destroyed: Europe 1517-1648* (London, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)