

Introduction

Christians, like all humans, have evolved rituals to mark the key moments of transition in life: rites of passage. The earliest Christian sources mention wedding feasts and allude to burial practices. They discuss baptism, of course, but besides baptism, the only time that the rite itself becomes the subject of the story is the wedding at Cana (John 2: 1–11). This narrative tells us something important about the way rites of passage work. When there is a perilous moment with the wine supply, we pick up the collective sense of the guests wanting to help, to ensure the success of the wedding. Rites of passage change the status of the individual or individuals directly involved, but they also involve the wider community.

The Churches and Rites of Passage was proposed as the theme for *Studies in Church History* 59 in order to promote sustained reflection on the historical development of those life events to which the churches responded with specific rites and ceremonies. It was intended in part to address current interests in life-cycle history, and in ‘rites of passage’, both ecclesiastical and secular. The major life-cycle rites of passage, the ‘checkpoints in the pilgrimage of life’, as Swanson calls them, are all covered in this volume. It includes articles discussing baptism, the churching or ‘purification’ of women after childbirth, confirmation and first communion, marriage, ordination, and events surrounding death and funerals, with coverage ranging from seventh-century Spain to contemporary America. Several articles explore terrain beyond the widely used life-cycle rites. O’Brien’s prize-winning essay discusses early royal anointing, a ceremony obviously much less frequently celebrated. It was the rite that made someone who was not a king, a king, and it was particularly crucial when royal succession was non-dynastic. Guiliano explores the renunciation of wealth as a rite of passage into the religious life, and ultimately the kingdom of heaven. Langley, meanwhile, investigates the officially sanctioned passage into clerical old age, with an account of what transpired when a minister in early modern Scotland became unable to perform his duties due to age and infirmity.

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It was Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957) who provided us with the language of ‘rites of passage’. His influential anthropological study was published in French in 1909, but not translated into English until 1960. Van Gennep explored how an individual in any society experiences life as a succession of major events, particularly relating to birth, puberty, marriage, parenthood and, finally, old age and death. The term became grafted on to what Anglicans traditionally described as the ‘occasional offices’ (now more usually described as the ‘pastoral offices’), although that term tends to be limited to an understanding of liturgical forms, without the wider social and cultural meanings implied in a rite of passage. In the opening article, O’Loughlin reassesses van Gennep by placing his anthropological work in the context of the assumptions of the church history of his own day, and by showing how he anticipates, and normalizes, the diversity that we now (mostly) take for granted in the contemporary practice of religious history. Van Gennep’s presence hovers over this volume: his ideas are also discussed in the contributions by Cruickshank, Deconinck-Brossard, Guiliano, Hansen, Knight, Langley and Walsham. Even after more than a century, he remains closer to us than we might have supposed.

It goes without saying that each of the rites of passage recognized within historic Christianity has its own particular cultural history and theological significance. Confirmation may have lost its status as a sacrament at the Reformation, but, as Walsham argues, its investigation offers fresh insights into the evolution of theology, liturgy and ecclesiology, as well as into the revolution in ritual theory precipitated by the Protestant challenge. The level of scholarly interest in the different rites has been uneven. Baptism, the threshold of entry into the Christian life, has attracted regular academic enquiry, as has ordination. Marriage and funeral rites have also elicited interest, although sometimes more from the perspective of social and cultural history than ecclesiastical history. In the medieval world, though, the surviving ecclesiastical evidence can be stronger. Van Houts demonstrates this in her discussion of the practice of blessing wedding chambers and beds in medieval north-western Europe, where there is a tantalizing mismatch between the plentiful liturgical and the sparse narrative sources for this intriguingly intimate domestic custom. Churching, the ceremony of reincorporating women into society after childbirth, is another intriguing custom, and one that has remained relatively little explored.

In historically Christian societies, the almost universal engagement of people with the Church's rites of passage has sometimes led to the conclusion that their participation must have been perfunctory. Often, of course, there is no evidence either way. In England, as Swanson shows, the records that pre-date the introduction of parish registers in 1538 document only the financial transactions associated with the rites, telling us nothing about the events themselves, and very little – if anything – about the people involved. As we move through time, we begin to catch glimpses of the little gatherings around fonts and altar rails, and of some of the people whose feelings on these occasions found their way into the written record. In Ottery St Mary during the Interregnum, McCall introduces Nicholas Haydon, whose child was rejected for baptism by the minister Mr Tuchin, because Tuchin insisted on a public demonstration of faith, and Haydon, perhaps confused by the question, responded by saying that some of the articles of his faith, the Trinity and the Incarnation, were 'indemonstrable'. In Malton in 1607, Walsham presents an exhausted Archbishop Matthew, who was struggling to confirm hundreds of people, and exclaimed: 'There were so many candidates, I nearly melted away in the heat'.

The turbulence created by the theological upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could result in a 'grumbling focus of local antagonism' directed towards the rites of passage, as McCall shows in her analysis of baptism during the English Interregnum. Walsham tells of the staunchly Calvinist Elizabethan archdeacon who sarcastically denounced the clergy's use of chrism; it was pointless, he said, 'unless they have shut the Holy Ghost in their grease pot'. It was an outburst of sarcasm that indicated something of the extent of the theological chasm that had opened up. Later, the 'grumbling antagonism' might mutate into a general sense of resentment towards the Church. It could become focused on the clerical enthusiasm for the public performance of baptism and churching, which many new parents considered best done discreetly and in private.

Death in its various stages is discussed in this volume. Ryan investigates it at its earliest intimation: the point when, within Roman Catholic culture, friends and family decide that it is necessary to call for a priest to administer the last rites to the dying person. The drama of the priest on his way to a sick call, hindered or assisted on this vital journey by obstacles or interventions, both human and

supernatural, emerges as a recurrent theme in the Irish folk tales that Ryan explores. After death has occurred and the ceremonies surrounding it have been concluded, the universal necessity of disposing of the corpse remains. Jacob's article focuses on the practicalities of dealing with large numbers of dead bodies in the nineteenth-century London metropolis. Then follows the process of remembering the life that had been lived. Binfield and Cruickshank analyse memorial literature produced to honour specific individuals. Binfield discusses Joseph Parker, the celebrated London Congregational preacher, who published a commemoration of his father-in-law, Andrew Common, a year after his death, recapturing 'a vital humanity that surely could not be extinguished'. Cruickshank considers George Bell's eulogy for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, delivered at his memorial service in London in 1945, and broadcast on the BBC. Bell emphasized Bonhoeffer's passage into martyrdom, and the continuing significance of his death in post-war Germany and Europe.

As well as the ink spilled over centuries in attacking, defending and explaining the theology and practice behind each rite of passage for a learned audience, there was also the mass production of ephemeral material, designed to encourage whatever the body producing it considered to be 'right belief'. In England, this material included the little tracts distributed in bulk by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and in France, the first communion cards that were sent to friends, relatives and teachers by youngsters or their parents, as souvenirs of the child's first communion. The almost chance survival of these tracts and communion cards provides an insight into the changing religious worlds in which they were used. In a different sense, the Irish folk tales can also be seen, in origin at least, as ephemeral survivals. In the late 1930s, the Irish Folklore Commission set about getting school children to gather and write up the folk tales of mainly rural parts of the recently independent Irish state. The material was then carefully preserved in a voluminous archive, ensuring its transition from ephemeral oral survival to carefully curated source.

Ordination sparked relatively little interest amongst the contributors to this volume and its associated conferences. There are two exceptions. The first is Platts's investigation of the sources for the early eighth-century Northumbrian church, with their focus on the ordination and other rites of passage experienced by Wilfrid. The second is Webster's article on Eric Mascall, an Anglican theologian

who emerged as a prominent opponent of women's ordination in the second half of the twentieth century. Mascall's opposition arose in part from his intense sense of the orderliness of Christian theology, and the difference in the roles it assigned to men and women. It was an argument that had been widely made in the earlier years of the debate, but by the 1980s and 1990s it was looking progressively less compelling.

If the passage of time brought significant change to rites such as ordination (at least within the Protestant churches), the impact of place has been another key factor. How have rites of passage, forged in the heartlands of Christendom, translated into other cultures? This is topic that would merit much further exploration. In the late seventh century, Anastasius of Sinai formulated a 'discreet and streamlined piety' comprised of what Hansen terms 'rites of maintenance': baptism, eucharist and the sign of the cross, a pared down ritual intended to sustain Christian identity on the boundaries of the Christian and Muslim worlds in the Umayyad Levant. Many centuries later, similar issues emerge in China. Yung's prize-winning article investigates Anglican rites in China, and the complicated interplay between Christian belief and respect for Chinese customs and elders. Wedding practices that seemed unproblematic in the West, such as joining the hands of a bride and groom, were abandoned because they attracted ridicule in the Chinese context. Payment for brides, and petitioning heaven and earth for blessings, were also forbidden as unchristian. The continued use of red sedan chairs in the bridal procession was, however, permitted as a harmless fashion statement. These were all matters of immediate concern for those organizing Anglican weddings in China, and Chinese Christians also had to wrestle with the issue of polygamy until the 1920s. Funeral practices posed further challenges. The Lambeth conferences issued documents on baptism and marriage for 'consideration' by worldwide Anglicanism, but these did not have any legislative authority. Over time, Chinese Anglicans and missionaries began to conclude that rites of passage could not be prescribed at conferences or in publications, but had to accommodate the realities of local life; Yung concludes that Chinese Anglicans became, in the end, 'self-theologizing'.

In her introduction to *Studies in Church History* 56, *The Church and the Law*, Rosamond McKitterick remarked that her choice of theme had been prompted, in part, by the conflict between the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, passed by the Westminster

Parliament in 2013, and the canon law of the Church of England. *Studies in Church History* 59 provides further historical reflection on the divergences and debates over the development of marriage law, where permissible practice is defined by statute, the teaching of the churches and the aspirations of some church members. Houlbrooke's article sets the scene with an investigation of early modern England's wedding sermons, a rather sparse and hitherto neglected homiletic genre that seems to have suffered from the enthusiasm of hearers to move on to the next stage of the festivities.

Subsequent articles focus more on the legal context. In the period from 1753 to 1836, English law limited the scope of legal marriage to that offered in the Church of England, with exceptions only for Quakers and Jews. This led, as Wykes explains, to the campaign among Unitarians and other Freethinkers who objected to the Trinitarian language in the marriage service. The law before the 1836 Marriage Act could also be burdensome to clergy, who might be legally obliged to marry couples whilst they protested loudly at this infringement of their religious freedom. 1836 proved to be a turning point with the passing of the Registration Act and the Marriage Act. As Jacob explains, this legislation, and the Burial Acts that followed, remedied some of the grievances of Dissenters, without significantly infringing on the activities of the Church of England. Probert's article picks up the story from 1836, exploring the public perceptions and legal entanglements surrounding early civil marriage ceremonies. In the twenty years after 1836, it was possible to have a wedding in a register office with the religious content of one's choice, but this was outlawed in the Marriage and Registration Act of 1856, which created the enduring separation between civil and religious marriage ceremonies.

In the concluding article in this volume, Bethmont brings the topic up to date with his discussion of the ways in which Anglican same-sex couples have created and adapted ceremonies, as civil same-sex marriage became available to them on both sides of the North Atlantic. Such couples have sometimes used the marriage liturgy creatively as a resource to give meaning and to 'change the fabric of reality' in ways that reliance on the sole power of the law could not. This, Bethmont argues, has unravelled a rigidly legal understanding of Anglican wedding ritual. It is evidence of the continuing potency of the ecclesiastical rites of passage, and their ability to be refashioned for the needs of a new generation of believers.

Introduction

The contributors to this volume include postgraduate students, early career researchers and senior scholars. Their articles began life as papers delivered at the Ecclesiastical History Society's Summer Conference in July 2021, and its associated Winter Meeting, in January 2022. Both events were held online, as we continued to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They attracted significant numbers of registrations, from all parts of the world. I am very grateful to everyone who participated, and for the new light that was shed on the topic. For many contributors, participation also meant putting up with the postponement of the conference that had originally been scheduled to take place in Nottingham in 2020, and working through the difficulties created by the extended closure of libraries and archives.

The committee of the Ecclesiastical History Society showed ingenuity and resilience as we navigated the COVID years. I am especially grateful to the Conference Secretary, Elizabeth Tingle, who remained unfailingly positive as we went through various permutations of on-campus planning, postponement, cancellation and finally online delivery. Meanwhile, the editorial team of Charlotte Methuen, Andrew Spicer, Tim Grass and Alice Soulieux-Evans produced the excellent and pertinent volume *Studies in Church History* 58, *The Church in Sickness and in Health*, when the *Rites of Passage* volume had to be rescheduled. I would particularly like to thank Tim: this is his final *Studies in Church History*, as he lays down a task that he began more than fifteen years ago. Generations of contributors have benefited from his excellent copy-editing, and from his wise and kindly interventions.

Frances Knight