

Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England, by Ellen K. Rentz.
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Imagining the Parish in Late Medieval England sets out to rectify the lack of attention that literary scholars have paid to the medieval English parish. Ellen K. Rentz corrects this scholarly gap by examining the idea of the parish through images and vernacular texts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. She is interested in the parish not as an ecclesiastical boundary, but as an imaginative structure—an idea that shaped how ordinary laypeople thought about religious practice, devotion, vernacular theology, and spiritual community. Rentz draws on images (manuscript illuminations, parish wall paintings, and stained glass) and vernacular works that were produced either for laypeople or for parish priests and operated at the parish level: canonical works like *Piers Plowman*, but also texts that have been neglected by literary scholars and historians alike (the *Prick of Conscience*, the *Lay Folks Mass Book*, and the *Northern Homily Cycle*). She argues that collective worship was a central element of the parish and that images and vernacular literature played an important role in shaping this ideal.

Rentz begins with two focal points of devotion and community—the font and the churchyard—and argues that they were central to both the physical space of the parish and lay spiritual identity. In spatial terms, these two sites marked either end of the nave of the parish church; in imaginative terms, the rituals of baptism and burial were a means through which laypeople created and renewed their parochial identity. Visual and textual representations of fonts (and here Rentz draws primarily from *Piers Plowman* and Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*) reveal that, as the focus of the baptismal ceremony, fonts gathered parishioners together and created an extended spiritual family for the child. Churchyards, too, forged and maintained these spiritual bonds when parishioners assembled at burials. As spaces shared by the living and the dead, churchyards emphasized the spiritual obligations that continued after death. Together, baptism and burial served as foci of devotion and fundamental sources of parochial identity.

Chapter 2 shifts to the sacrament of penance, which Rentz argues was more important to parochial devotion than scholars have acknowledged. Penance, while an individual act, was emphatically not private. Confession likely took place in the collective parochial space of the nave, and visual representations of confession stress its public aspect. Parishioners also recited the *Confiteor* along with their priest at every Mass, expressing individual penance in a communal

context. Pastoral handbooks recommended that a parish priest perform the General Sentence up to four times per year: he should read a list of excommunicable offenses and then perform a symbolic excommunication, dramatically closing the ritual by casting a candle to the ground, spitting, and ringing a bell. By symbolically performing exclusion from the Christian community, the priest both reminded his parishioners of the dangers of sin and reinforced parochial identity. As a “fundamentally collective enterprise” (35), then, penance shaped the broader parochial community.

Even if a parish priest did not read the Great Sentence as often as he should, he would have regularly led processions—as part of Sunday masses, on saints’ days, and on special liturgical days. Processions, Rentz argues in Chapter 3, symbolized an individual’s progression toward God and salvation and expressed the ideal of shared commitment to the church. Processions figured prominently in both pastoral manuals and vernacular sermons; sermons, in particular, depicted communal processions as an important medium of worship. Parish processions symbolized both individual and collective movement from sin to salvation. In Chapter 4, Rentz argues that agricultural work served as a similarly powerful symbol, associating manual labor with spiritual labor and the agricultural village community with the spiritual community.

In her final chapter, Rentz provides a sort of case study of one parish by closely examining the *Prick of Conscience* window in All Saints Church, North Street, York. In the fifteenth century, a local family commissioned the All Saints window; it was based on the *Prick of Conscience*, a popular vernacular poem written in northern England in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Rentz focuses on the window’s engagement with the poem, arguing that the window does not merely illustrate the poem, but rather “issues a call to prayer and ultimately imagines the parish working together to achieve salvation” (126).

Imagining the Parish provides a useful contribution to scholarship on both medieval devotion and the late medieval English parish; Rentz’s examination of often overlooked vernacular sermon collections and other religious texts will benefit historians and literary scholars alike. By treating the parish as an idea, Rentz is able to examine the imaginative structures that shaped the spiritual community and show the centrality of collective worship to the parish. Perhaps, though, some attention might have been paid to women or gender. The late medieval parish—as a place, as an idea, as an ideal—was never gender-neutral.

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