
In this book (originally the Riddell Lectures for 2002), Eamon Duffy returns to a topic he surveyed extensively a decade before in *The Stripping of the Altars*: the primers or Books of Hours which were a vital component of lay piety in pre-Reformation England, particularly after the advent of print dramatically widened their social diffusion. Yet *Marking the Hours* represents much more than the dusting-off of old notes. Its title is a clever pun, for the heart of Duffy’s investigation is a feature of these texts which librarians deprecate and bibliographers ignore: the extensive annotations, additions and alterations made by their original and subsequent owners. Whether consciously or not, Duffy’s publishers have ensured that his book evokes some of the more upmarket products it discusses: printed on luxuriously thick paper, its own margins are wide enough to accommodate a parallel text, and it contains a remarkable total of 114 colour illustrations.

Marginalia, of course, offer to the historian of texts some sort of resolution to the problems of use and ‘reception’. Duffy is not naively optimistic on this score (‘the history of prayer . . . is as difficult to write as the history of sex’), but he is sure that such annotations provide important clues to the inner lives of late medieval Christians which previous scholars have overlooked or misconstrued. The exercise is most effective when particular volumes can be assigned to known individuals. The Book of Hours belonging in the mid-fifteenth century to John Talbot, earl of Shrewsbury, for example, contains quasi-magical prayers for protection of a sort likely to appeal to a combatant soldier. From such examples, Duffy dismisses the notion that primers were the preserve of the pious, the accoutrement of the amateur mystic. What contemporaries saw as a ‘good prayer’, he suggests, is better likened to a tried-and-tested cookery recipe than to an eloquent piece of poetry. Primers could be status symbols, as well as aids to worldly protection, but they do not so much straddle the boundary between sacred and secular as invite us to reconceptualise the distinction. Notes on agreements, debts and contracts sometimes appear in the margins, but this may be because...
books of Hours were used instead of Gospels for the swearing of oaths. They contain listings of births and deaths within the family, but often for the purpose of focusing intercessory prayer.

What they do not provide evidence of is a growing individualism at odds with the corporate traditions of medieval Christianity. Here Duffy continues an argument with Colin Richmond over the supposed 'privatisation' of religion among the late medieval gentry, and picks one with Jonathan Hughes and John Bossy, who have detected in Books of Hours the notes of a self-righteous and even aggressive prayer life, what Bossy calls 'sanctified whingeing'. Duffy will have none of it. Psalms of complaint and deliverance from enemies formed only one strand of the texts' pattern of prayer, and their concentration in the office for the dead suggests spiritual rather than worldly enemies as the objects of malediction. The interiorisation of piety the primers undoubtedly encouraged was not an individualistic withdrawal from traditional Catholicism, but something the authorities were actively seeking to promote. Indeed, Duffy argues that an otherwise curious feature of these undoubtedly popular texts — their retention of Latin — was symptomatic not of growing individualism but of a desire to connect with the Church's official liturgy. Nor were primers always read on one's own. Here Duffy pulls off a minor masterstroke, inviting us to look again at Holbein's famous drawing of the household of Sir Thomas More. The fact that most members of the family, male and female, are holding books has usually been seen as an assertion of Renaissance humanist values. But Duffy points out that all are holding the same book: the household is about to embark on a communal recitation of Our Lady's matins. More took a printed Book of Hours to the Tower in May 1534, and wrote extensively in it. Duffy's poignant reading of these annotations finds little 'autobiographical vehemence', or signs of a suppressed monastic vocation finally allowed to flower. Rather they exemplify what the primers themselves were all about: 'individual participation in a varied but coherent public religious culture'.

The Reformation, of course, dismantled that culture, and Duffy takes the story to its conclusion. There was no sudden apocalypse. Henrician owners dutifully crossed out from their books the names of the pope and Thomas Becket, while under Edward and Elizabeth reformed vernacular versions aimed for a while to fill the market niche. In the end, however, many inherited Books of Hours did become tokens of religious individualism, in the hands of recusants and church papists. This