**From Community Conflict to Collective Memory:**

**Lived Religion and the Late Medieval Parish Church, c. 1350-1539**

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**Bio:**

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies, with an emphasis in Medieval History and Christianity, at Northwestern University. My research interests include parish life, the dynamics of lay religious communities, particularly the productivity of conflict in these communities, and the relationship between space, gender and religious practice. My advisor is Richard Kieckhefer and committee members are Katherine French (History, University of Michigan), Dyan Elliott (History, Northwestern) and Michelle Molina (Religious Studies, Northwestern). I can be contacted at [kwbain@u.northwestern.edu](mailto:kwbain@u.northwestern.edu) or [kristi.bain@yahoo.com](mailto:kristi.bain@yahoo.com).

**Project:**

What draws individuals to bond with their community? And how does a community sustain that bond and its identity throughout centuries of change and transformation? These are the questions that motivate my interest in the late medieval parish, which has for centuries organized lay religious life in England. To answer these questions, my point of departure is conflict between monastic and parochial communities over shared use of the parish church and the potential these conflicts have to unite parishes, both in the past and across generations. For example, in a 2001 guidebook for the medieval church at Wymondham Abbey, Norfolk, the author draws readers’ attention to its two bell towers as “a reminder of how Christian people with their individual characteristics and fights should stand together in the service of God.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This passage alludes to the fifteenth-century “fight” when the parishioners of Wymondham rioted against the interfering monks with whom they shared the church. Not only did the laity win permission to build their own bell tower, but local histories like the one above use this conflict to unite modern parishioners in dedication to each other and the physical space in which they worship.

My dissertation focuses on religious life in local communities andhow conflicts between competing monastic and parochial communities over their church’s shared physical space deepened and complicated the meaning of that space throughout successive generations. While not typical parish communities, there are numerous such shared churches across England and they frequently came into conflict over the shared use of space. The late medieval English parish particularly lends itself to such a study because of its lasting imprint on local religious culture. England’s national and county record offices possess a wealth of medieval parish records and local histories, which embrace parish life as emblematic of the country’s pastoral roots. Taken together they present the perfect opportunity to study how the retellings of those conflicts figure into modern constructions of parish identity. Thus disputes such as the one at Wymondham Abbey bring into sharper focus the concreteness of medieval parish communities, while the churches that bear the scars of those conflicts persist today as memorials of parishioners’ actions*.* To take into account the particularities of medieval grassroots religious life, my study begins by examining ritual and spatial aspects of the medieval parish, precisely because monastic-parochial conflicts erupted from disagreements over physical features such as bell towers, doorways, processional space, and the churchyard. As I then broaden my scope, I will consider how local historians have presented and distributed historicalknowledge to the public and the ways in which parishioners are encouraged to engage with and relate to their history.

A key component of my argument is the functionality of conflict, both as a method of memorialization and also as a catalyst for community action and unity. Conflict, I argue, provided an opportunity for these parish communities to define themselves. While conflict in socially-stratified and involuntary communities surprises few, historians of the late medieval parish have tended either to ignore conflict or use it as leverage in the debate about the inevitability of the Reformation. For instance, Eamon Duffy, in his seminal work, *The Stripping of the Altars*, passes over any evidence of social diversity or disputes within parishes in his effort to show how the late medieval parish was a stable institution that only disintegrated because of the Reformation. I posit, however, that the conflicts under examination were fruitful elements in community building, uniting parishioners sometimes against and sometimes with their priests in a struggle to define, protect and assert control over their sacred and social space.

My dissertation is not just about contested space; it is also about the individuals who cared enough about their parish church to fight for it. Katherine French’s social history, *The*

*People of the Parish*, has shown that people of all backgrounds participated fully in parish life. Bearing these conclusions in mind, I will trace the role and identity of the laity who were prominent both as patrons and leaders of these medieval disputes, while also paying particular attention to how parish historians and communities in later centuries have reconstructed and valorized their contributions. This memorialization becomes especially pronounced with the rise of Victorian antiquarianism and recently-published guidebooks and local histories, in which nostalgia plays a profound role in the way that medieval communities are imagined. A parish’s corporate identity has never been static but has been molded into various versions of collective memory through the ages, from medieval bede-rolls that reminded parishioners of loyal patrons, to ancient conflicts that historians have infused with new meaning in later centuries. Using as a touchstone Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s sociological examination of collective memory in modern religious communities, I explore how recent histories combine antiquarian sentiments with a revived interest in their medieval past. Such historical renderings evince the changing significance of these disputes as parish communities have become more secular and diverse and as their churches are increasingly threatened by declarations of redundancy.

The starting point for my research is late medieval East Anglia and its monastic-parochial conflicts in Wymondham, Norfolk, and Hatfield Broad Oak, Essex. From there I will branch out to other counties to examine parallel cases, such as those in Spalding, Lincolnshire, and Sherborne, Dorset. I have already begun research in several archives and libraries throughout England, including the Norfolk and Essex Record Offices, the Wymondham Abbey Muniment Room, the British Library, London Metropolitan Archives, and the National Archives. Another important element of my methodology will be to examine these existing medieval parish churches and speak with churchwardens, volunteers and local historians to understand how these conflicts have been remembered and recorded and to what end.

Ultimately, I am proposing a study that locates the point where medieval parish life and modern memorialization intersect, an intersection that becomes strikingly apparent in monastic-parochial disputes. The vitality of grassroots parish religion has already captured the imaginationof historians, and my project explores this vitality both through late medieval parish disputes and through the ways in which historians have assigned meaning to them. What then emerges from this examination is a new way of thinking about how the medieval laity lived their religion at the parish level, how they related to their priests as well as the neighboring monks and nuns, and how their stories align with the ones that local historians wish to tell us. More broadly, I am taking seriously the role of the medieval parish church and its community in symbolizing England’s pastoral society and long religious past, a role often taken for granted by academics but not by the locals who have shaped and been shaped by the history of their parish.

1. John Barnes and Paul Cattermole, *Wymondham Abbey*. (Bury St. Edmunds: Miro Press, 2001), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)