

SPCK Tracts and Rites of Passage in the Long Nineteenth Century

Frances Knight* 
University of Nottingham

This article investigates how the SPCK, the Church of England's major nineteenth-century publishing house, encouraged what it saw as correct participation in church-administered rites of passage, by the mass production of tracts. SPCK's elaborate editorial policy meant that the tracts provide a rare glimpse into what can be assumed to be the Church of England's officially sanctioned voice, giving the tracts a significance beyond their survival as ephemeral religious literature. The article discusses tracts relating to marriage, baptism, churching and confirmation, the audience for which was mainly, although not exclusively, working-class adherents of the Church of England. It highlights the tangle between theological ideas and social expectations, as well as the echoes of some other theorists – from Malthus to Freud – which found their way into the Church of England's thinking at different times during this period.

INTRODUCTION

A whole retinue of ideas clustered around the rites of passage celebrated by the Church of England in the long nineteenth century. Some were theological: baptismal regeneration, confirmation as the renewal of baptismal vows by the instructed baptized, marriage as an analogy of the union between Christ and his Church, churching as thanksgiving and reincorporation, burial as a prelude to judgment and eternal life. An even larger retinue of social and cultural practices surrounded the ceremonies. Although liturgical language smoothed over differing circumstances and perspectives, creating the impression of a shared understanding, and of a goal jointly achieved, it is obvious that the participants often engaged in these rites with very different expectations. When church ended, a domestic ritual usually took

* E-mail: frances.knight@nottingham.ac.uk.

Studies in Church History 59 (2023), 332–358 © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Ecclesiastical History Society. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.
doi: 10.1017/stc.2023.15

over – a wedding reception, a baptismal family celebration, a confirmation party in a pub, a funeral tea – which created further layers of meaning, and the *communitas* which Victor Turner, anthropologist and interpreter of Arnold van Gennep, identified as arising from rites of passage.¹ Kinship networks were strengthened by merging families and by creating what were often the reciprocal ties of godparenthood,² or they were fractured by death or strained by controversial marriage choices. The presence of family, friends and sometimes the wider community was usually seen as adding to the efficacy of the event, although sometimes the participants wished for privacy, and to keep others at a distance. For several centuries, the Church of England's rites of passage had provided the pivots and scaffolding for a myriad of personal crises and celebrations. But as people came to its churches for these ceremonies, it looked on nervously. It wanted everyone to participate, but it wanted them to do so in what it considered to be the right way. In an attempt to improve correct participation, it adopted a strategy typical of religious organizations and movements in the long nineteenth century: it issued tracts. The idea was that supporters would buy them in bulk and give them to people in their parishes.³

These tracts were published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK), beginning shortly after 1689 and ending only in the 1950s. Over one million SPCK tracts were described as 'in circulation' in 1817, and the figure had risen to over six million in 1887.⁴ As Nicholas Dixon has pointed out, SPCK 'constituted a crucial component of normative Anglican identity', particularly in the years before the revivals of the convocations of Canterbury and York

¹ Victor Turner wrote extensively about *communitas*, particularly in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, 1969). For a useful summary, see Victor and Edith Turner, 'Religious Celebrations', in Victor Turner, ed., *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Washington DC, 1982), 201–9. For more on Victor Turner, see Fiona Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion*, 2nd edn (Oxford 2006), 153–66. See also Douglas J. Davies, *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford, 2002), 120, 129. Davies argues that 'the priest does well to enter into the spirit of those occasions, fostering *koinonia* amidst *communitas*'.

² Naomi Tadmor, 'Early Modern English Kinship in the Long Run: Reflections on Continuity and Change', *Continuity and Change* 25 (2010), 15–48.

³ The biographers of Archbishop Secker claimed that he had distributed thirty thousand SPCK tracts during his primary visitation of the Canterbury diocese in 1758: Richard Sharp, 'Review of R. W. Greaves and John S. Macauley, *The Autobiography of Thomas Secker: Archbishop of Canterbury*', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 61 (1992), 92–4.

⁴ W. O. B. Allen and Edmund McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge* (London, 1898), 197.

in 1852 and 1861 respectively. The society was sanctioned and supported by all the English bishops and large numbers of clergy and laypeople. For many years, it represented the mainstream of Church of England opinion, and was not identified with any particular party, proclaiming itself to be as equally 'Against Enthusiasm' as it was 'Against Popery'.⁵ By the early Victorian period, however, the sharpening of party identities caused SPCK to be criticized from both the Tractarian and the evangelical wings of the church,⁶ but although it found it harder to retain its position in the Anglican centre ground, it remained a very important vehicle for promoting officially sanctioned ecclesiastical opinion. This article examines a selection of the tracts issued by SPCK relating to marriage, baptism, churching and confirmation during the long nineteenth century. The SPCK tract collection, in the care of the Cambridge University Library since 1998, has much to tell us about the behaviours that the church wanted to instil, particularly in its working-class members, and about the practices that it wanted to stamp out. The tracts reveal the church attempting to uphold traditional social and class conventions, amid changing social and legal realities. Rooted in a rural mindset, they reveal a church struggling to adjust to the urban world.

With growing levels of literacy and a shortage of simple reading materials, SPCK started tract production when it began its publishing activities in the late seventeenth century, with *A Tract on Confirmation* by Josiah Woodward, and *Pastoral Advices to those who are Newly Confirmed* amongst its earliest publications.⁷ The society formed a specific tract committee only in 1834, the year after the beginning of the Oxford *Tracts for the Times*. This may have been an attempt to provide an episcopally sanctioned counterblast to the Tractarians. It certainly provided a rival to the influential evangelical Religious Tract Society, founded in 1799.⁸ The approval process for

⁵ Nicholas Dixon, 'The Activity and Influence of the Established Church in England c.1800–1837' (PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 2018), 238, 256–7. His chapter on 'The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and the Press' (ibid. 238–93) contains much useful material on the SPCK in the earlier nineteenth century.

⁶ Ibid. 289–91.

⁷ Allen and McClure, *Two Hundred Years*, 168–9. These publications appeared shortly after SPCK was founded, in 1698.

⁸ For the Religious Tract Society, see Joseph Stubenrauch, 'Silent Preachers in the Age of Ingenuity: Faith, Commerce, and Religious Tracts in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', *ChH* 80 (2011), 547–74.

publication was convoluted and slow, producing works which were designed to be inoffensive to the largest number of SPCK supporters, who needed to be willing to buy and distribute them. First, a new manuscript had to be recommended by four SPCK members, and then referred to the tract committee via the society's standing committee. It was read by members of the tract committee, and then set in type, with proofs sent to five episcopal referees. Only once they had given approval and the author had agreed to any required changes was the revised document sent back to the standing committee, which authorized its onward progress to the society's board. Then, at least until 1838, there followed the most surprising part of the editorial process: a final decision on whether it should be published was settled by a ballot of the members attending each monthly board. The ballot presumably came to be regarded as too unpredictable (and perhaps too democratic), and after 1838, the decision was placed in the hands of the seven-member tract committee, with a final sanction of approval provided by the episcopal referees.⁹

Yet despite these challenges, there were plenty of authors who were prepared to write tracts. The work was well paid and being published by SPCK was useful as a guarantee of one's orthodoxy. The peak years of tract production were in the period from 1850 to 1890. In a representative year, 1859, one hundred and twelve new titles were issued. They were very specifically targeted.¹⁰ The society's 1874 report

⁹ W. K. Lowther Clarke, *A Short History of the SPCK* (London, 1919), 47; idem, *The History of the SPCK* (London, 1959), 172–81; Allen and McClure, *Two Hundred Years*, 191. Close supervision from a panel of bishops continued into the twentieth century. Various high churchmen were critical of SPCK's policy: John Keble, preaching at the annual meeting of the Winchester District Committees of the Societies for Propagating the Gospel, and Promoting Christian Knowledge on 31 May 1838, criticized the SPCK's willingness to admit anyone as a subscriber, without enquiry as to whether they lived a sober and religious life. He believed that this was a fearful accommodation to the spirit of the world: John Keble, *Sermons Academical and Occasional* (Oxford, 1847), 249. Equally, many of the SPCK tracts did not find favour with evangelicals: Isabel Rivers, 'The First Evangelical Tract Society', *HistJ* 50 (2007), 1–22.

¹⁰ Target groups identified by other scholars include prisoners and emigrants. Rosalind Crone provides an interesting exploration of the work of John Field, chaplain at Reading Gaol in the 1840s and 1850s, who wrote SPCK tracts for prison inmates, including 'Friendly Advice to a Prisoner' and 'A Chaplain's Word at Parting': Rosalind Crone, 'The Great "Reading" Experiment: An Examination of the Role of Education in the Nineteenth-Century Gaol', *Crime, History and Societies* 16 (2012), 47–74. Rowan Strong identified an anonymous female tract writer from Plymouth, who wrote a children's tract, 'The Young Emigrants', around 1850: Rowan Strong, 'Pilgrims, Paupers or

indicates some of the categories of people that they were aiming to reach with specific tracts: 'self-educated persons of average ability', 'semi-educated persons', 'imperfectly educated persons', 'infidels', 'deists', 'very plain people', 'untidy wives', those with 'itching ears'.¹¹ The largest category comprised tracts for 'general distribution'.¹² This targeted approach can be seen in the tracts relating to rites of passage, which frequently address themselves to a specific social class or gender. There are, unsurprisingly, tracts on marriage aimed at young men, and others aimed at young women: there are those intended for middle-class couples, and those for the working class (which are sometimes alarmingly explicit about the prevalence of domestic violence). The tract committee avoided any concessions to modern scholarship. B. F. Westcott on the resurrection was turned down by Bishops Sumner of Winchester, Jackson of Lincoln and Ollivant of Llandaff in 1868, and in 1864 Henry Alford was criticized for attempting his own translation of some verses in the Bible, which was seen as a slur on the Authorized Version.¹³

There were two main formats. There was the narrative form, most popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, which was designed to stimulate the interest of those in search of a short story. There was also the simple theological treatise, which was usually blended with practical instructions on how to conduct oneself at the ceremony being discussed. They varied in length, but typically were in the range of ten to twenty pages and published in a small format similar to the modern A6 international paper size (105 mm x 148 mm). The shortest I found was a single sheet printed on one side listing six do's and don'ts for a woman coming to a churching ceremony (including the instruction that she should enjoy it).¹⁴ Most of the tracts were anonymous, although the tract collection also contains some relevant longer works by named individuals, for example Edward Berens's *Explanatory Observations on the Occasional Offices of the Church of England* (1843). The society seems to have been willing to place the author's name on

Progenitors: Religious Constructions of British Emigration from the 1840s to the 1870s', *History* 100 (2015), 392–411.

¹¹ Those who wandered between places of worship because their ears itched for something different: see 2 Tim. 4: 3.

¹² Lowther Clarke, *History*, 173.

¹³ *Ibid.* 176.

¹⁴ Anon, *A Word on the Churching of Women* (London, 1876).

the title page when the work was considered particularly good, and when a bishop or archdeacon wrote, he appears to have done so under his own name. Far fewer tracts were produced in the early twentieth century, and after the First World War they turned into longer and more informative pamphlets, written in short chapters or clear sections. The story form, which by the 1890s must have seemed old-fashioned and patronizing, was abandoned.

Of course, none of these tract writers would have known the phrase ‘rites of passage’. They saw themselves as writing about the occasional offices. It is to Arnold van Gennep that we owe the language and theory of rites of passage. Van Gennep published *Rites de passage* in 1909: it was not translated into English until 1960, after which, slowly but surely, it began to make an impact.¹⁵ Part of van Gennep’s enduring significance comes from his having identified a three-fold pattern to the moments of transition in people’s lives: separation, transition and incorporation. He saw these three states together as the schema of the rites of passage. The late John Bossy was probably the first modern ecclesiastical historian to adopt the terminology, and van Gennep’s theory, in his groundbreaking book *The English Catholic Community* (1975).¹⁶ Bossy realized the significance of rites of passage in delineating the boundaries of separation for a community which felt itself under threat. He returned to rites of passage more generally in his *Christianity in the West* (1985).

The SPCK tracts provide some insights into the expectations surrounding these moments of transition. It is evident that clergy and participants were often seeking different meanings within the ceremonies themselves,¹⁷ and were layering legal, theological, social and cultural meanings, although these were to some extent concealed by the liturgical assumption that all Christians should be treated in a similar way. There were plenty of contradictions and tensions, but these ceremonies would not have been functioning in van Gennep’s sense as rites of passage if this had not been so.

¹⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2nd edn (Chicago, IL, 2019).

¹⁶ John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850* (London, 1975), 132–44.

¹⁷ Davies, *Anthropology and Theology*, 120.

MARRIAGE

For the whole of the long nineteenth century, marriage was seen as one of the great public institutions on which the stability of society rested.¹⁸ The era after Lord Hardwicke's 1753 Marriage Act emphasized that it was a contract creating legal certainty, apportioning responsibility for children and safeguarding property and inheritance rights. SPCK's tract writers tried to instil a sense of the enormous spiritual risks and responsibilities that marriage entailed. Marriage was consistently treated as the least predictable and most hazardous rite of passage, because it involved two souls in a complex relationship, in which one could drag the other into perdition. Until the early twentieth century, it was presented as having profound implications for one's fortunes in the next life, yet it lacked the compelling eschatological promises associated with baptism and confirmation. This sense of the serious risks involved is one of the tracts' frequently recurring themes. George Davys in a narrative tract commented that the seriousness of marriage was such that 'the happiness of this world, and probably the next' depended upon it.¹⁹ Edward Berens, writing for SPCK in 1843, urged married couples 'not only to live together in this life in mutual love, but to have a hope of meeting together again in the life everlasting'.²⁰ While the tract writers emphasized the gospel teaching that the risen dead will be as angels, 'neither married nor given in marriage', they promised that those who had had holy marriages could expect to be 'in a closer union, absorbed in each other, and both in Eternal Love'.²¹

Selecting the most suitable partner was therefore paramount, and the tract writers delivered much advice about the qualities to look for. Working men should look for 'a good housekeeper' who would shop

¹⁸ Josef Ehmer, 'Marriage', in David I. Kertzer and Marzio Barbagli, eds, *Family Life in the Long Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 282–321, at 285. For more on the background, see Erica Harth, 'The Virtue of Love: Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act', *Cultural Critique* 9 (1988), 123–54; David Lemmings, 'Marriage and the Law in the Eighteenth Century: Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753', *HistJ* 39 (1996), 339–60; Ginger S. Frost, *Living in Sin: Cobabitation as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester, 2008), 9–28.

¹⁹ George Davys, *Village Conversations* (London, 1850), 35.

²⁰ Edward Berens, *Explanatory Observations on the Occasional Offices of the Church of England* (London, 1843), 31.

²¹ Anon, *Tracts on Practical Subjects addressed to the Working Classes*, No. 2: *Marriage* (London, 1860), 24; see also Mark 12: 25; Matt. 22: 30; Luke 20: 34–6.

well, cook well and sew well, 'a neat, tidy, bright little woman to sit opposite to you and chat to you'.²² Working-class girls should look for a young man who had been a good son. If no one was suitable, they should stay single, rather than risk a perilous marriage.²³ Marrying someone from the same church was also considered highly desirable, presumably meaning someone of the same denomination, rather than restricting one's choice to worshippers at the parish church. Beilby Porteous, writing in 1781, was particularly candid about the risks associated with intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants, which resulted, he believed, in a 'shipwreck of faith' with the Church of England partner usually the one sunk.²⁴ Much of the advice was predictable and timeless: Berens urged people intending to marry to consider the disposition and habits of their partner when 'the first warmth of passion has subsided'.²⁵

The continuing influence of the political economy theories of Thomas Malthus is seen late into the nineteenth century, with couples urged to delay marriage for as long as possible, using the lengthy engagement to save money, and also to limit their fertility.²⁶ A writer addressing a tract on 'reckless marriage' to church workers expressed it bluntly: a bride of seventeen might have had six children by the age of twenty-five. The author noted callously: 'Happily, owing to the inexperience and neglect of these girl-mothers, many of these unfortunate children early end their sufferings in death, but a sufficient number of them linger on, a misery to themselves and a burden to the State.'²⁷ Seventeen-year-olds who wanted to marry should be told to wait for eight years. If work was short, the young man should seek work in the colonies, and send for his bride when ready. This writer regretted that the clergy could not enforce this policy, but were legally obliged to marry couples if no one objected when the banns were called. Another tract against early marriage, this one addressed to the mothers of teenagers, suggested that marriage could be delayed by settling girls as residential servants in respectable homes, and encouraging

²² Anon, *Three Questions about getting Married: A Tract for Young Men* (London, 1885).

²³ Anon, *On Marriage: A Letter to Young Girls* (London, 1873).

²⁴ Beilby Porteous, *A Letter to the Clergy of the Diocese of Chester containing Precautions respecting the Roman Catholics* (London, 1781), 9.

²⁵ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 25

²⁶ *Ibid.*; Anon, *Three Questions*; Anon, *About Marriage: Thoughts for Young People* (London, 1889).

²⁷ Anon, *About Reckless Marriage: to Church Workers* (London, 1888).

boys to lodge at YMCAs with restaurants, rather than looking for a young bride to cook and mend.²⁸

There are echoes of the changing legal framework surrounding marriage. The ability to marry in a register office, or a registered religious building belonging to another denomination, which was granted under the 1836 Marriage Act, made it clear that matrimony was no longer seen as having exclusively religious overtones, and yet it was still far from being a civil partnership between equals.²⁹ As late as 1880, SPCK issued a tract aiming to clarify the legal and ecclesiastical position on civil marriage. ‘There seems no doubt that a marriage by a Registrar is lawful; and however strongly we Christian churchmen must regret the adoption of such a mode of marriage, we are not justified in treating people married by a Registrar as if they were not “man and wife” or their children as if they were not legitimate.’ Nothing should be done which seemed to ‘treat the law of the land with contempt’.³⁰ However, if a civilly married couple decided that they would afterwards like to come to church, they were entitled to have the full Prayer Book marriage service, with the omission of the publication of banns, and the register signing.³¹ Rebecca Probert’s article in this volume discusses in detail the questions surrounding Anglican ceremonies that were held after register office weddings in the period from 1837 to 1857. But the SPCK tracts show that the question of the ecclesiastical status of civil marriages was far from settled even in the late nineteenth century.

The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act moved divorce from the ecclesiastical to the civil courts, whilst still making it extremely difficult to obtain. The legal position of married women under English law was also evolving, as they began to be seen as retaining some level of independence, instead of being entirely absorbed into the legal entity of their husband. This was expressed in the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882.³² SPCK remained unsympathetic to these developments: ‘Too often people think that when they weary of each other, they can separate – but this is one of the greatest sins against God.’ Furthermore, stated the same tract writer, evidently

²⁸ Anon, *On Marriage: Address to Mothers* (London, 1890).

²⁹ Lloyd Bonfield, ‘European Family Law’, in Kertzer and Barbagli, eds, *Family Life*, 109–54, at 115.

³⁰ Anon, *Marriage by a Registrar: Or, Where shall I be Married?* (London, 1880), 5.

³¹ Anon, *Marriage by a Registrar*, 3.

³² Bonfield, ‘European Family Law’, 121–4.

addressing a male readership: 'God has given you dominion over the woman; your superior strength of mind and body entitle you to this rule. ... The first duty of a wife is obedience, and she should readily submit, even if she is better educated or has a stronger intellect than her husband.'³³ A tract writer in 1890, who identified herself as a middle-class mother and a 'lady', stated bluntly that many, in all classes of society, would regret their choice of marriage partner, but there was 'nothing to be done about it' beyond trying to prevent the same fate being perpetuated in the next generation, by counselling against early and reckless marriages.³⁴ The SPCK material was very typical of much nineteenth-century writing on marriage in attempting to link together the claim of male dominance with the concept of companionate marriage based on mutual respect and affection.³⁵

In contrast with the material on baptism, churching and confirmation, which tends to be more ecclesiastically focussed, the tracts on marriage tell us relatively little about the conduct that tract writers desired to see at the wedding ceremony itself: the overwhelming amount of material relates to choosing a partner, and then surviving in the married state. When weddings are discussed, emphasis is placed on ensuring a serious demeanour among bride and groom, and sometimes also the guests. A reference to bad behaviour among those who came 'to see a wedding' indicates that the convention of wedding services being attended only by invited guests had not yet been established:

It is the people that go to the wedding that generally behave the worst. There are some idle gossips ... who are sure to be at every wedding, though they perhaps seldom are at Church at any other time; and then there is often a noise, and a going in and out, and a clattering of pattens, so as to raise a very great disturbance in the Church, and to make every thing quite different from what it ought to be.³⁶

Laughing when the banns were announced and gathering in alehouses before and after a wedding were also condemned. The emphasis was on having the bride and groom exhibit seriousness

³³ Anon, *Tracts on Practical Subjects: Marriage*, 1.

³⁴ Anon, *On Marriage: Address to Mothers* (London, 1890), 1.

³⁵ Ehmer, 'Marriage', 286.

³⁶ Davys, *Village Conversations*, 32.

and 'religious reverence' in the face of all the public interest and carousing.

BAPTISM

When the SPCK tract writers wrote about baptism, they concentrated mainly on three issues. The first was upholding and defending the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, and the second was emphasizing the duties and responsibilities of godparents. The third related to the performance of the rite, and the need to distinguish adequately between the civil registration of births and the sacrament of baptism, and to counsel against informal naming practices, which, even though theologically valid, were seen as inferior to publicly celebrated baptisms.

Baptismal regeneration had long been a contentious issue, with varying theologies arising from the differing emphases in the liturgy, rubrics and canons. SPCK had, however, been making the case for baptismal regeneration decades before it became an issue for the Tractarians or the subject of the infamous Gorham judgment in 1850.³⁷ Samuel Bradford's *A Discourse concerning Baptismal and Spiritual Regeneration*, first published by SPCK in 1709, was a staple on their list throughout the eighteenth century. It was reissued in 1771 and, in anticipation of bulk sales, was advertised at twelve shillings and sixpence for a hundred copies. Bradford, an early eighteenth-century bishop of Rochester, and not a high churchman, referred repeatedly to baptism as 'the washing of regeneration'.³⁸ A similar theology was expressed in *Christian Directions and Instructions for Negroes*, published in 1789. This took the form of ten dialogues imagined between a presumably enslaved man and a clergyman. The instruction was that one man should read one dialogue per week 'to as many other negroes as he can gather together' returning to the first dialogue after week ten and continuing with that pattern 'until your dying day'. The eighth dialogue, on baptism, indicated that faith and repentance were required of adult converts, and

³⁷ E. B. Pusey offered the Tractarian view of baptismal regeneration in Tracts 67, 68 and 69. For Gorham, see John Wolffe, 'Gorham, George Cornelius (1787–1857)', *ODNB*, online edn (2004), at: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/11099>>.

³⁸ Samuel Bradford, *A Discourse concerning Baptismal and Spiritual Regeneration* (London, 1771), 8, 10, 15.

assumed that adult baptismal candidates would be the majority in the context of a slave plantation, but it also implied the full efficacy of infant baptism.³⁹

The material addressed to godparents provides an insight into the social effort required as a child was incorporated into the local community through baptism. Two godmothers and one godfather were required for a female child, and two godfathers and one godmother for a male. Acting as a godparent was, as Edward Berens remarked, ‘an act of neighbourly kindness ... of Christian charity. It is an office which neighbours ought to undertake for each other, from their obligation to do as they would be done by.’ Neighbours who refused to act as godparents put the parents of a child who needed to be baptized ‘to most serious inconvenience’.⁴⁰ The church required godparents ‘for greater security’, and to step in, in the event that the parents were ignorant or inattentive or died prematurely, when they were ‘to stand proxy for the child, to covenant in its name, and to engage for its Christian education’.⁴¹ The rubrics required them to be present at a baptism, but the concern was that not everyone took on the task with sufficient seriousness, with neighbours sometimes making hasty arrangements before the service to take turns in standing godparent for each other’s children. A tract of 1838 reminded godparents that they too had once been baptized at ‘the font of regeneration’, and others had made promises on their behalf. Now it was their turn: the eternal welfare of their godchildren rested in their hands, until the time that the young person was confirmed. Godparents were urged to intervene if the parents seemed to be neglecting the child’s religious education, and they should persuade them to send the child to the local National or parochial school.⁴² After his rather stark recital of the weighty obligations of the office in the earlier tract, Berens shifted into a notably more pastoral tone, inviting those ‘who kindly undertake the office of sponsors’ to inform themselves beforehand of the answers the baptismal liturgy required them to make and requesting ‘that those who can read would bring their Prayer Books with them to the font’.⁴³ He also sought to reassure godparents, in a manner which

³⁹ Anon, *Christian Directions and Instructions for Negroes* (London, 1789), 74–86.

⁴⁰ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 7.

⁴² Anon, *Address to Godfathers and Godmothers* (London, 1838).

⁴³ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 7–8.

softened slightly the expectations imposed in the 1838 tract, that they were not required to ensure that their godchild grew up to be virtuous, merely that he or she was instructed in religion. Berens maintained that godparents were still necessary in the event of adult baptism ‘as witnesses to their engagement’, even though adults made answers at the font for themselves.⁴⁴

George Davys’s *Village Conversations* tract on baptism began with a discussion of godparenthood. Thomas asked William to be godfather to his latest child, and expressed regret that with his older children, he had failed to take the matter seriously, relying on ‘any of our relations, or anybody we could get’. These godparents had been predictably useless: ‘not one word of Christian advice had any of them ever given the children’.⁴⁵ Thomas and William’s discussion proceeded to model the desirable attitudes to godparenthood: they pointed out that asking after the children’s progress was not the same as interfering, and that a ‘scrupulous religious person’ should not be deterred from the office by the fear of doing it wrong. In a manner typical of these narrative tracts, the two men are described settling down together to read through the baptismal service, to check their understanding.

The promotion of public baptism, sometimes also linked with public churching, was a further topic of concern to the tract writers. Thomas admitted to another of his failings as a father: he had arranged for his older children to be baptized at home, almost as soon as they were born ‘for fear that they should die, as they say, *without a name ... Named*, or as some people call it *half-baptised*’.⁴⁶ Whether anyone besides the tract writers referred to naming as ‘half-baptism’ is unclear, particularly as there was printed in the Prayer Book a shorter form authorized for the ‘private baptism of children in houses’. The popularity of ‘naming’, a swift private baptism which conferred a name and thus an identity on a child, as well as guaranteeing Christian burial, is well attested in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Naming was certainly a valid form of baptism, and some poorer parents saw it as having the additional benefit of not requiring

⁴⁴ Ibid. 14.

⁴⁵ Davys, *Village Conversations*, 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 7 (italics original).

⁴⁷ Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge, 1995), 86–9.

godparents, who might expect to be ‘treated’ and invited to a social gathering afterwards. Higher status parents, or those with a sick baby, sometimes expected the clergyman to call on them, and conduct a private baptism in the home, which would use a shortened form of the rite. The child was then supposed to be brought to the church to be publicly received once its health had improved.⁴⁸ Berens warned that ‘[i]n no case does the Church allow the service of Public Baptism [i.e., the full service – FK] to be used in a private room.’⁴⁹

The ideal was full public baptism with godparents present, incorporated into the service after the second lesson during Morning or Evening Prayer, on a Sunday or holy day, but this was only practical when the numbers of babies were small. Unsurprisingly, naming had its defenders amongst the hard-pressed urban clergy. In the 1840s, George Wilkins, archdeacon of Nottingham and vicar of St Mary’s, Nottingham, named the many children that were brought to him in the vestry, sprinkling them with water, using the baptismal formula, saying a couple of prayers and then registering them as the son or daughter of the person whom the bearer stated.⁵⁰ For the SPCK tract writers, such a practice would have been lamentable, although they never explained how full public baptism was supposed to work in heavily populated urban parishes, or where parents were unable or unwilling to find sponsors. Wilkins also pointed out that the civil registration of births, which had been enacted in 1836, coming into effect in the following year at the same time as the civil registration of marriages, had had a detrimental effect on the numbers of babies being brought for baptism. Before that time, a baptism certificate had been seen as essential, functioning in much the same way that a birth certificate did subsequently, and many children of non-church members had been brought to the font to ensure the creation of their legal identity.

A tract of 1860 tackled the issue of people thinking that civil registration had done away with baptism; it is interesting that this was evidently still seen as a problem over twenty years after the legislation

⁴⁸ W. M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680–1840* (Oxford, 2007), 194–5.

⁴⁹ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 13.

⁵⁰ Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 87–8. He appears to have been using the Prayer Book’s service for the Private Baptism of Children in Houses. Perhaps this was why he chose to perform the baptisms in the vestry, rather than in the main body of the church. It probably also speeded up the issuing of the baptismal certificate.

had been passed. It was written as a dialogue between John (a new father) and a clergyman. The clergyman hoped that John's baby would soon be brought to church for baptism. John replied that he had no plans to do this: 'I was very glad when the registration was brought in, and did away with Baptism altogether.' He explained further that 'if you want to get [the baby's] certificate, and know all about him, you can get it from the office'.⁵¹ The clergyman responded that although the birth certificate would do for this world, it would not be adequate for entry into the next world, an argument which seemed to place all the emphasis on the eschatological significance of baptism, rather than the more immediate issue of entry into the Christian community of the church. This baptism tract, together with the 1880 marriage tract considered earlier, indicate just how destabilizing the arrival of civil registration had been for the Church of England's traditional role as the supervisor of these rites of passage. The full significance of the 1836 Act seems to have dawned on the clergy only slowly.

CHURCHING

David Cressy and others have provided extensive discussion of the issues surrounding churching in early modern England.⁵² Less evidence survives for the nineteenth century, although some of the old debates, for example over the wearing of white veils, made a reappearance. SPCK claimed in 1876 that 'the duty of coming to Church to give thanks after childbirth is one that, happily is but seldom omitted',⁵³ and the relatively small number of tracts issued on the subject could suggest either that it was so uncontroversial as to require little additional promotion, or that it was beginning to be seen as something of a lost cause. Yet we know that it continued well into the twentieth century, particularly in

⁵¹ Anon, *Infant Baptism, or, Hath this Child been already Baptized?* (London, 1860), 3.

⁵² David Cressy, 'Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England', *P&P* 141 (1993), 106–46; idem, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 197–229; William Coster, 'Purity, Profanity and Puritanism: The Churching of Women 1500–1700', in W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds, *Women in the Church*, SCH 27 (Oxford, 1990), 377–87; Donna K. Ray, 'A View from the Child-Wife's Pew: The Development of Rites around Child-Birth in the Anglican Communion', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 69 (2000), 443–73.

⁵³ Anon, *The Churching of Women* (London, 1876).

working-class communities, and, as Sarah Williams and Margaret Houlbrooke have shown, that it became a private ceremony performed in church or (as the number of hospital births increased) in hospital. It was seen as spiritually significant by some participants, but also hedged around with family pressures and concerns about bad luck and impurity.⁵⁴ Writing in the early 1970s, the Anglican sociologist Bill Pickering noted the continued persistence of churching in the North of England.⁵⁵ A rite for churching did not, however, appear in the Church of England's *Alternative Service Book*, published in 1980.

The 1662 liturgy, following the revision of 1552, provided the woman with an opportunity to give 'heartly thanks' for having safely survived the great dangers of childbirth, and it did not hint at Levitical concerns about post-partum uncleanness. Indeed, the only Levitically-derived requirement was in the rubric that she should 'offer accustomed offerings' which by the nineteenth century had become a financial offering, which was presumably retained by the minister, or directed to church expenses.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it is evident that ideas about new mothers being tainted and sources of ill-luck had not disappeared, and a common feature of the SPCK tracts was to hammer home the point that the service was a form of thanksgiving, and not a cleansing from ritual pollution or a means of securing good luck. Edward Berens declared that 'this part of the Jewish ritual as well as the notion of legal pollution or defilement was entirely

⁵⁴ S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880–1939* (Oxford, 1999), 87–104; see also Sarah Williams, 'Urban Popular Religion and Rites of Passage', in Hugh McLeod, ed, *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830–1930* (London, 1995), 216–36; Margaret Houlbrooke, *Rite Out of Time: A Study of the Churching of Women and its Survival into the Twentieth Century* (Donington, 2011). Some of the women that Houlbrooke interviewed looked back on the experience positively, but others expressed anger or disgust that they had been pressured to undergo a ritual that they barely understood.

⁵⁵ W. S. F. Pickering, 'The Persistence of Rites of Passage: Towards an Explanation', *British Journal of Sociology* 25 (1974), 63–78; see also Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1957), 56–7. They noted that in Bethnal Green in the 1950s, forty-one out of a sample of forty-five mothers had been churching after the birth of their most recent child.

⁵⁶ See Lev. 12 for the biblical origins of the churching rite. Unlike baptism, marriage and burial, there was no set fee for a churching, although the woman was expected to make an offering based on what she could afford. A tract in 1890 suggested that 'a rich lady might give a pound, or five pounds' whereas the poorest were only expected to give a penny: Anon, *The Churching of Women* (London, 1890).

done away with by our blessed Saviour.’⁵⁷ Nonetheless, people evidently wondered why the church provided a special thanksgiving for women who had survived childbirth, but not for those who had overcome other personal crises. Berens implied that friends and neighbours should use the churching service to join in a general sense of thankfulness for their own deliverances. Other writers felt that the only justification needed was that there was such a service in the Prayer Book. To promote this idea, George Davys penned a dialogue between Mrs Brown who had just had a baby, and her friend Mrs Walker, with the women making alternating speeches on the duty of post-partum thankfulness, and the beauty of the liturgy which would be the vehicle for the thanksgiving.⁵⁸

The other much-repeated theme was the importance of the churching service’s taking place in the context of public Sunday worship, something which it seems was increasingly widely ignored. The BCP rubric did not presuppose the presence of a congregation, which made enforcement tricky. The desire for privacy in relation to baptism, particularly amongst elite families, is well documented,⁵⁹ and this extended naturally to a desire for privacy concerning the churching of the new mothers. Citing words which he had directly taken from the eighteenth-century liturgist Charles Wheatly, Berens railed against what he described as the ‘ridiculous solecism’ of being ‘churched at home’. ‘For with what decency or propriety can the woman pretend “to pay her vows in the presence of all God’s people, in the courts of the Lord’s house” when she is only assuming state in a bed-chamber or parlour, and perhaps only accompanied by her midwife or nurse?’⁶⁰ A tract of 1856 instructed that a woman should attend the churching ceremony ‘as soon as her feet can carry her beyond her own threshold’, advice which perhaps only served to reinforce the popular belief that an unchurched woman was a source

⁵⁷ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 56.

⁵⁸ Davys, *Village Conversations: Churching*, 53–4.

⁵⁹ James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson 1758–1802*, ed. John Beresford (Oxford, 1978), entries for 1 October 1777, 11 April 1779, 29 January 1780, 22 September 1780; see also Jacob, *Clerical Profession*, 194–6.

⁶⁰ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 57, citing Charles Wheatly, *A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* (London, many editions), 596; originally published as *The Church of England Man’s Companion ... or, A Rational Illustration of the Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1710).

of contamination.⁶¹ The writer added that the woman had a further cause for gratitude if the child had survived, which underlines the point that the ceremony was intended to be a thanksgiving for the survival of the mother, and all about the woman, irrespective of what had happened to the baby.

The clerical insistence on public churching clashed with various social conventions. In 1808, the Anglican priest-poet George Crabbe had pointed out the incongruity of the 'amorous dame':

For Rite of Churching soon she made her way,
In dread of scandal, should she miss the day;
Two matrons came! With them she humbly knelt,
Their action copied and their comforts felt.⁶²

Presumably the possibility of one's wife having to kneel down in public beside the local 'amorous dame' was one of the reasons why men as well as women could be critical of the clerical expectation for public churching: the ceremony created a worrisome level of equality among new mothers of different social stations. In 1850, H. R. Harrison of Elston, Nottinghamshire, announced that the only time that he was prepared to church women was immediately before the general thanksgiving during the Sunday service, at the same time that babies were brought for baptism. This led to a row with the patron of his living, whose wife wished to avoid the 'novelty and publicity' to which she would be exposed by such a procedure.⁶³ It appears that he took her elsewhere, to be churched on a weekday. Another priest-poet, John Keble, in his poem 'The Churching of Women', which was part of his best-selling *Christian Year* collection, drew on the medieval tradition advocating the veiling of women, which had been revived in the early seventeenth century as a marker of high church ceremonial.⁶⁴ He saw this as having the double benefit of being a return to an ancient custom and making the woman less identifiable and largely inaudible:

⁶¹ Anon, *Advice to Cottagers* (London, 1859).

⁶² George Crabbe, 'The Parish Register, Part 1: Baptisms', in *The Poetical Works of the Revd George Crabbe*, vol. 2 (London, 1834), 159.

⁶³ Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives, Cor B5/8A/3, Elston Papers, June 1850; see also Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 89–91.

⁶⁴ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death*, 216–22.

Slight tremblings only of her veil declare
Soft answers duly whispered to each soothing prayer.⁶⁵

Keble provided a footnote in which he cited Wheatly as his authority that for the woman coming to church after her delivery ‘decently apparelled’ meant ‘in a white covering or veil’, although in fact whilst Wheatly had acknowledged the ancient veiling custom, he had declared that it was in 1710 obsolete and that ‘the woman’s apparel should be left entirely to her own discretion’.⁶⁶ Percy Dearmer, at the end of the nineteenth century, alluded to the ancient veiling custom in the earliest editions of *The Parson’s Handbook* almost as a historical curiosity, but advocated it in the enlarged edition that he produced in 1902.⁶⁷ He advised that the verger should keep a clean veil, and hand it to each woman as she came to be churched, which was an admission that women would not arrive at the ceremony already veiled. In characteristic Dearmer style, he was precise about the details: the veil should be hemmed and about four feet square, of very thin linen, so that it could be placed over the bonnet. In those twentieth-century communities where pressure was exerted for women to be churched, the veil was probably only a minor issue, although Houlbrooke hints that old veils were being cleared out of vestry cupboards along with service cards, and suggests that this may have taken place much later than is generally supposed.⁶⁸ She shows that in many areas of England the rite remained widely observed until the 1950s.⁶⁹

In the 1928 Prayer Book, the rubrical reference to ‘decent apparel’ was dropped and replaced with the instruction that the husband should also attend, ‘if he so desire’. This hinted rather strongly that the ceremony was now understood to be a private one. Houlbrooke’s evidence confirms that this was indeed the case, and that women attended either

⁶⁵ John Keble, ‘The Churching of Women’, in *The Christian Year* (London, 1827), 255–6.

⁶⁶ Wheatly, *Rational Illustration*, 598. As Cressy has shown, Keble could have drawn on an older body of high Anglican sources to support the use of the veil, as it had been a heavily contested issue: Cressy, ‘Churching’, 132–40.

⁶⁷ Percy Dearmer, *The Parson’s Handbook* (London, 1899), 192; idem, *Parson’s Handbook*, 2nd edn (London, 1902), 417.

⁶⁸ Houlbrooke, *Rite Out of Time*, 104, 133. About one-third of her sample had covered their heads, or worn special clothes, and a similar proportion remembered sitting or kneeling in a special ‘churching’ place. The example that she gives of a vestry clear-out occurred in 2002.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, e.g. 125–38.

alone, or with their mother or mother-in-law; husbands were almost never present.⁷⁰ Another intriguing alteration in 1928 was the replacement of the word 'priest' with 'minister'. Whilst this meant that the rite could now be performed by deacons, around this time there was discussion of extending the duties of deaconesses to include churching, and this was recommended at the Lambeth Conference in 1930,⁷¹ although not apparently widely adopted. But it signalled, whether consciously or not, a return to the situation which had pertained in early modern England, in which churching had been a ceremony that the new mother had celebrated with her midwife and with other female friends, and which also contained an important occasion for all-female socializing.⁷²

SPCK issued a small flurry of churching tracts in the 1870s; there was, it seemed, so much about churching that had to be explained and defended. Why, for example, did it not take place in the Church of Scotland? This question was tackled by Susanna Warren in *Mrs Angus's Thanksgiving* (1873). Did it bring good luck and did the absence of it bring bad luck? Could a new mother leave the house and go to town, if unchurched? What happened to the money that the woman offered? Why was the fee not fixed? These and other matters were discussed in what appears to have been the final SPCK tract on the subject, in 1890, which helpfully illustrated a broad range of popular understandings.⁷³ It was perhaps evident to the tract committee that churching had been recast in the realm of folk religion, and this provides a context for Dearmer's attempt to resuscitate its historic Anglican credentials at the end of the decade.

CONFIRMATION

The Church of England's rite of confirmation retained its popularity into the 1960s, particularly among young women and girls. In that

⁷⁰ Ibid. 104.

⁷¹ Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive, 1930, Resolution 70, 'The Ministry of the Church – The Ministry of Women', online at: <<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930.pdf>>. Whether or not a deaconess could officiate at churchings was left to the discretion of each bishop: Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England 1857–1957* (Oxford, 2013), 102, 115.

⁷² Cressy, 'Churching', 113–15, 143. He suggests that in some places, midwives and other women were excluded from their special seats after the Restoration.

⁷³ Anon, *The Churching of Women* (London, 1890).

decade, there was a rapid drop in candidates of both sexes. The number of female confirmation candidates per thousand of population in the age range 12–20 halved in the period from 1961 to 1974, from 39.3 in 1961 to 19.6 in 1974. Numbers of male confirmation candidates followed a similar trend.⁷⁴ Before that, however, it was popular with the youth of both sexes. It was the traditional point of entry into full adult participation in the church, as the candidates ‘confirmed’ their faith for themselves, but as a rite of passage its cultural significance was probably more important than its varied theological meanings.⁷⁵ At some point early in the twentieth century, confirmation ceased to be inextricably linked to catechizing.⁷⁶ Before that, children were expected to commit to memory the whole catechism, which began with the simple ‘What is your Name?’ and rapidly moved into much more complex territory. It required specific answers concerning the meaning of sacraments, the essential components of Christian conduct and the duty towards neighbours, as well as the accurate recital of the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer. It also assumed the existence of godparents. A rubric in the Prayer Book stated that ‘all fathers, mothers, masters and dames shall cause their children, servants and apprentices to come to church at the time appointed ... until such time as they have learned all that is here appointed for them to learn’.⁷⁷ The idea was that clergy and teachers would drill young people in the catechism until they had it off by heart, although effective catechizing was seen as involving far more than parrot repetition. In this way, the intergenerational transfer of religious knowledge would be assured.

⁷⁴ Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford, 1977), 167; Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London, 2001), 191–2.

⁷⁵ See Phillip Tovey, *Anglican Confirmation 1662–1820* (London, 2014) for a comprehensive study of confirmation in the long eighteenth century. His chapter on ‘Theologies of Confirmation’ is particularly helpful in outlining the range of traditional understandings which may have informed some of the tract writers: *ibid.* 7–29.

⁷⁶ The evangelical James Packer, writing in 1961, commented however that ‘few clergy now make confirmation candidates learn it’ and that it had been neglected over the previous fifty years: James Packer, ‘The Revised Catechism’, *The Churchman* 75 (1961), 107–18, at 110.

⁷⁷ The catechism was printed between the orders of service for baptism and confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer. SPCK published a range of teaching aids, often known as ‘Broken Catechisms’, that were intended to assist with catechetical instruction.

SPCK published around a hundred and eighty tracts on confirmation, about one hundred more than were produced for either marriage or baptism. Presumably it regarded confirmation candidates as a captive market, sufficiently literate and, as they prepared for the service, open to religious influence. It may also have anticipated that a tract would make a suitable confirmation gift. Probably the most frequently repeated theme was that the grace conferred at confirmation, when properly received, gave the recipient the power to resist the impulses of youth, as they entered upon the period when they were 'beset with temptation' and no longer under the watchful protection of their parents.⁷⁸ In a narrative tract from 1891, one boy tells another that the purpose of confirmation was to give the strength to resist temptation, and that fact that so many returned from the ceremony apparently unchanged was a sign that they had thrown the gift away.⁷⁹ Bishop John Kaye, in a tract aimed at 'young ladies' after their confirmation, made much of the dangers to which they would be exposed in the 'world of gaiety and amusement' in the years before they entered upon their duties as wives and mothers.⁸⁰ As well as being seen as a vaccination against succumbing to temptation, confirmation was regarded as a gateway, with entry limited to those who passed the test: 'the great requisite is a competent knowledge of the Church Catechism',⁸¹ wrote Berens. For those who achieved a pass, the way was opened up to admission to holy communion, although, as a writer in 1888 noted, 'many who are confirmed never come to Holy Communion'.⁸² Another stressed that although confirmation was not itself a sacrament, its sacramental promise of 'inward and spiritual grace' was 'strongly implied'. Furthermore, it had been instituted by the apostles only a very short time after Christ's ascension, making it even more nearly sacramental. He also implied that confirmation could function as a 'break clause' for those who no longer wished to be associated with Christianity: 'if we neglect this ... we show that we no longer wish to be considered members of the

⁷⁸ William Grey, *A Village Clergyman's Address to his Parishioners on an Approaching Confirmation* (London, 1850), 7. The understanding of confirmation as a vaccination against temptation was a theme proposed by Jeremy Taylor: Tovey, *Confirmation*, 10.

⁷⁹ Anon, *Confirmation* (London, 1888).

⁸⁰ John Kaye, *Advice to Young Ladies after their Confirmation* (London, 1849), 10.

⁸¹ Berens, *Explanatory Observations*, 17.

⁸² Anon, *Confirmation*.

Christian body'.⁸³ This was a softening of the harsher message conveyed by a tract writer of the late eighteenth century, who had declared that their religious welfare was now no longer the responsibility of their parents and godparents: 'Eternity is before you, and it is left to your own choice whether to be happy or miserable forever It will therefore be your own fault, if you bring [God's] curse upon you and not a blessing'.⁸⁴

The tract writers' comments about candidates' behaviour during and after the confirmation service suggests that they were only too aware of what could happen when large numbers of young people were brought together.⁸⁵ Riotous behaviour had been reported following confirmations in various Lincolnshire parishes in the 1830s and 1840s. Perhaps these young people linked confirmation with other more boisterous rites of passage into full adulthood, such as drinking to excess, dancing with 'lewd women' and generally noisy behaviour in which they asserted their new status. The clergy were expected to police the proceedings and to lay on treats for the candidates, no doubt partly to dissuade them from the public houses.⁸⁶ Tovey, however, stresses that eighteenth-century conduct was often described as pious and well-mannered, and that 'confirmation seemed to hold a festal part in society as a whole'.⁸⁷ It typically took place between the ages of fourteen and nineteen, and the huge gatherings of young people – over a thousand were confirmed in Bedford in 1829 – certainly generated their own momentum of excitement and festivity. Many parishes produced high numbers of candidates, and this, coupled with the fact that the tract writers warned against repeat confirmations, suggests that some people did indeed go forward more than once, although efforts were made to prevent this.⁸⁸ In 1838, Amersham produced 126 candidates out of a population of 2,816, and Milton Keynes produced 30 out of a population of 334.

⁸³ Grey, *Village Clergyman*, 2, 6–7.

⁸⁴ Anon, *Pastoral Advice to Young Persons before Confirmation* (London, 1799), 5.

⁸⁵ On the numbers of candidates presented at eighteenth-century confirmations in England, see Tovey, *Confirmation*, 107–36.

⁸⁶ Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 92.

⁸⁷ Tovey, *Confirmation*; 110, 171.

⁸⁸ Anon, *The Order of Confirmation: With Instructions for them that come to be Confirmed and Prayers to be used before and after Confirmation* (London, 1800), 13; Anon, *Pastoral Advice*, also stressed that confirmation should only be undertaken once.

In the other Buckinghamshire parishes, typically between 1 and 7 per cent of the population were confirmed in 1838.⁸⁹

George Davys used a dialogue tract between his village characters, George and Thomas, to reflect on confirmation practices in 1850 and in the earlier generation. When Thomas's son is due to be confirmed, Thomas reflects on his own confirmation, presumably back in the 1830s: they had been taken to the service in the churchwarden's wagon, he remembers, and laughed the whole way. When the service was over, they went to the alehouse for bread and cheese and beer, 'and we all thought it was nothing else but a fine holiday'. The pious William speaks up for the warden, who had arranged the wagon so that they did not arrive hot and weary, and who had taken them to the alehouse because they needed some refreshment. If Thomas had behaved badly, or had improper thoughts, it was nobody's fault but his own. After reflecting on all this, Thomas decides that he will give up a day's work, in order to take his son to the confirmation so 'that he might stand a better chance of keeping out of harm's way'.⁹⁰ This seems to be an admission that, even in the fictionalized rural parish imagined by Davys, rowdy confirmation could be imagined as a problem. It was partly for these reasons that in the second half of the nineteenth century, candidates were sometimes segregated by gender and class.⁹¹ Public school boys began to be separated from farm boys and apprentices, and young ladies separated from kitchen maids. This assisted in achieving the reformers' objective of making the ceremonies smaller. It also suggested confirmation preparation could be tailored to particular groups, and SPCK's material provided for this possibility.

CONCLUSION

What is the significance of the SPCK tract material? Firstly, it provides a relatively rare glimpse into the Church of England's officially

⁸⁹ Knight, *Nineteenth-Century Church*, 93, citing Lincoln, Lincolnshire Archives Office, CorB5/9/1–14, Confirmation Papers. The largest confirmation service that Tovey discovered was for over five thousand candidates in Manchester in 1787: Tovey, *Confirmation*, 107.

⁹⁰ Davys, *Village Conversation: Confirmation*, 29.

⁹¹ Anthropologists see gender separation in puberty rites as normal: Barbara Myerhoff, 'Rites of Passage: Process and Paradox', in Turner, ed., *Celebration*, 109–35, at 122–6. Segregation by gender may also have been usual in the earlier period: Tovey, *Confirmation*, 109.

sanctioned collective voice. The extremely cumbersome editorial processes, and the heavy episcopal involvement, give the tract collection a status which extends beyond its significance as a survival of once widely distributed, but ephemeral, popular religious literature. The teaching in the SPCK tracts remained fairly consistent over the nineteenth century. As is often typical of religious literature, it continued to imagine a world that was rapidly passing away. The seemingly unreflective tangle of theological ideas with contemporary social and economic theories is itself very revealing.

Secondly, the tracts provide further evidence of the centrality to the Church of England of the Book of Common Prayer. We know that as the Church of England's only authorized liturgy the Prayer Book was vitally important to nineteenth-century Anglicans, but the tracts emphasize this again. Arguments end in a simple appeal to its authority, and in the narrative tracts a much-repeated trope is the production of a well-thumbed Prayer Book from the pocket of the more knowledgeable character, who goes through the relevant service with the character who needs to be instructed. In this way, Anglican doctrine is portrayed as being passed on among the literate working classes. 'Beautiful' is perhaps the word used most frequently to describe it, and the Prayer Book is mentioned much more frequently than the Bible.

Thirdly, the tracts give an insight into the generally dismal fare served up at this period for the instruction of the tens of thousands of people who lived within the Anglican tradition. The teaching may be roughly summarized as follows: the significance of public baptism needed to be regularly restated in the face of those who wanted a quick 'naming' ceremony, or worse still, thought that the issuing of their baby's birth certificate had made baptism unnecessary. Confirmation, rather than being the opportunity to publicly assert adult faith, or receive a spiritual gift, was rather crudely a vaccine against temptation, and if the vaccine appeared not to take, then to hell one might go. An unwise marriage would likely lead in the same direction. For new mothers, there were multiple pressures to get to the churching pew, and a fair amount of mixed messaging. Of course, there is scant evidence for how the advice in the tracts was received; we may assume that for people of all classes, including tract readers, baptisms, confirmations, weddings and safe recoveries from childbirth remained occasions for personal and communal celebration and festivity. But at a time when many of the Church of England's leading thinkers were adopting a more incarnational theology, there

was a noticeably lengthy time lag before there is evidence of change in SPCK's popular messaging.

After the First World War there was, however, a very discernible change. The tracts were replaced with small-format pamphlets, and there was a revolution in content, as well as in style. Gone were the references to the Prayer Book as a source whose authority was beyond question, and the need for obedience to church teaching in order to secure the heavenly reward. The content became more Catholic – the two dominical sacraments were augmented to create the full seven – and also more biblical, with more frequent references to Scripture. Two examples from the 1930s were astonishingly different from anything produced earlier. In 1932, F. H. Hulme produced *Enlisted and Armed: Instructions for Confirmation Candidates*, which began with an energizing series of exclamations: 'We are alive! God made us for a purpose! God made me to live as his child! God became man!' The sixty-eight-page booklet then developed as a confirmation course, with the emphasis upon confirmation as a form of ordination into Christian service for the laity, for 'in the ship of the church, there are no passengers, all are crew'. Hulme, who was archdeacon of Bloemfontein, went further:

You have been ordained to serve God in prayer, public and private, to receive the sacraments, assist in missionary work, to give alms ... to serve your fellow man irrespective of his nationality, position or colour, to maintain the indissolubility of marriage, to work and pray for the reunion of Christendom ... you must never cease to fight against class, race and colour prejudice.⁹²

In 1936, SPCK published *In Preparation for Marriage* by Lindsay Dewar, which was revised and reissued on several occasions up until 1958. At only twenty pages, it conformed to the tract format, and it seems to have been SPCK's final, much republished, tract on this subject. It was set within a hinterland of psychology and sexology, far removed from the earlier material; gone was the once familiar language about marriage as the preparation for the heavenly realm. The engaged couple were urged to get themselves checked by a doctor, to ensure that they would be capable of having sex, and they were urged

⁹² F. H. Hulme, *Enlisted and Armed: Instructions for Confirmation Candidates* (London 1932), 64–5. A note stamped on the front indicates that it was not to be reprinted after December 1941.

to find out what it involved, by consulting a doctor, a clergyman or a book. Sexual intercourse should always be by mutual consent: there were no conjugal 'rights'. Men were warned that if women nagged, it was likely that this had a psychological cause: they were feeling ignored or imposed upon. Dewar observed that 'women have been treated as inferior for so long that this has a bad effect on many of them, giving them an inferiority complex'.⁹³ For this reason, the 'obey' clause in the marriage service should always be omitted, when the bride wished this, for marriage was 'a joint achievement'. He went further: a couple would have learned much from the behaviour of their own parents; a man would unconsciously think of his wife in terms of his mother, and a woman, 'deep down', would think of her husband in terms of her father.

There had clearly been a revolution at the SPCK tract committee, and the society's publishing programme appeared to be developing in some intriguing new directions. The SPCK remains significantly under-researched. This is perhaps surprising, in view of its central importance in the history of Christianity in Britain and overseas over a period of three hundred years, and the fact that its archives are now in a major research library. The relative paucity of SPCK's twentieth-century tract material makes generalizations on the basis of Hulme and Dewar unwise, but a useful avenue for further research might be to examine more widely SPCK's mid-twentieth-century popular publications, to see if they share the progressive sentiments of these authors. For most of the period covered in this article, SPCK showed itself to be the cautious, conservative mouthpiece of the Church of England, but it may turn out that by the middle years of the twentieth century, it was in the vanguard of driving religious change. These final tracts provide a revealing glimpse into the revolutions in popular Christian thought that were then occurring.

⁹³ Lindsay Dewar, *In Preparation for Marriage*, 2nd edn (London, 1947), 8–9.