



# WORSHIP IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND



**Matthew Cheung Salisbury**

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# **Worship in Medieval England**

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Oxford, Christmas 2017



## Introduction

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This little book has two objectives in mind. By its existence in this series and by means of its counterproposals against three scholarly orthodoxies, it argues for the complexity of the liturgy as a subject for study, and shows that the surviving medieval evidence needs to be examined in ways quite different from the summary treatment it often receives. It also, however, seeks to encourage the reader in their own (future) investigations of the topic by introducing some of the key ideas, resources, and methods, and proposes ways in which they might be explored.

This introduction provides a common vocabulary and understanding of forms, structures, and genres which will be referred to, and a sense of how the liturgy fits into a wider understanding of medieval culture. Each chapter then seeks to present an alternative perspective to ideas and conventions that have sometimes become normative simply because no other possibility has seriously been considered. Many of these observations will be pertinent for liturgical studies of wider geographical scope, spanning the Western Church of the late Middle Ages, but the specifics which follow in three short chapters are focused on the English context. Readers who already have experience with the subject matter will, hopefully, find ways in which these examples challenge and question

their thinking, whilst those who are new to thinking about the medieval liturgy will find a foothold.

For these last readers particularly, an additional purpose of this volume is to unsettle the notion that liturgiology is a mysterious, abstruse, and monolithic discipline. Like trainspotting and birdwatching, the discipline of liturgical studies sometimes has a reputation for attracting people who enjoy collecting very detailed information over a long period of time, sometimes without apparent purpose, or who take extreme pleasure in seeking out and recording peculiarities which stand out only to them. There is no denying that the niceties of liturgical philology, as it were, are challenging for the neophyte to enjoy, but what follows seeks to show the reader what may lie beyond the immediate impression of convoluted structures and confusion. In fact, as Chapter 3 suggests, the historical study of liturgy is something to which very few people come specially trained, and everyone comes to it with questions.

It is also undeniable that liturgical studies can attract some people for whom Christian worship is confessionally important and for whom the study of medieval forms and orders is seen as a means of informing present-day practice. In this volume I would like to suggest some ways in which the field lies equally open to those without either of these proclivities (although, in the spirit of transparency, I must nail my colours to the mast as guilty of both). Surely no subject of study is free from such motivations and incentives.

### **Introducing the Liturgy: Forms, Structures, Genres**

In the present day, “liturgy” is a word that many people use to refer to the organized and structured worship of God, especially in churches which emphasize order and dignity,

and so its apparent relevance for the Middle Ages may be clear. Famously, the origin of the word “liturgy” is said to be found in a Greek word which has often been translated as “the work of the people,” but more recent discussions point out the fact that *leitourgia* really means something more like a public duty or obligation: still an appropriate sense. It is something of an anachronistic word to use for the purpose, however, since it was not habitually used in the Middle Ages. Neither was “worship,” of English derivation (“worth-ship”). In the texts of what (for convenience) we must really call “liturgical books,” what happens in church, if described in the abstract, might be described with a variety of names: *ordo*, *servicium*, *missa* (itself etymologically interesting, as it derives from *lte*, *missa est*), or *officium* (this last, like “liturgy,” recalls the sense of duty, obligation, or service).

It is worth keeping the sense of “duty” in mind, for attendance in church was one of the greatest obligations in the lives of medieval Christians. Attending worship was a divine imperative (St. Benedict writes that “nothing is to be preferred”); this was true for laypeople and secular clergy as well as religious. Frequent attendance was also a social reality. Laypeople were obliged to attend regularly, with some going to services every day, and priests were required to celebrate Mass (the ritual re-enactment of the Last Supper) daily. The vast majority of people in medieval Europe were Christian (an identity inherited by birth), and the progress of every life was marked, week by week and year by year, by participation in the sacraments and other rites of the Church, as well as a familiarity with the daily and yearly liturgical cycles which hallowed time.

The liturgical rites of the Church were, first and foremost, an offering to God which, in various ways, reflected the obligation of God’s people to worship him. It is no surprise that the Divine Office (the daily cycle of prayer

from Matins to Compline, a cycle of services separate from the Mass) had the poetry of the Psalms at its heart, together with other readings from Scripture and prayers. The Office was recited daily and communally by clergy and religious, but also, especially in its private devotional forms, by literate laity. While the basic form of the Office (psalms, Scripture, and petition) remained constant, individual communities would often celebrate it in particular ways laid down by tradition and in accordance with local circumstances. In addition to the rich variety of the Psalms, the mainstays of the principal offices were all canticles, or songs, from the Gospel according to Luke. Each of these canticles (the Benedictus in the morning at Lauds, the Magnificat in the early evening at Vespers, and the Nunc dimittis at Compline, before bed) reflects in a different way on the Incarnation of Christ. The Benedictus, sung by John the Baptist's father Zechariah, gives thanks for the coming of the promised Messiah, while Mary's own words in the Magnificat emphasize the transgressive justice of the Incarnation. Finally, the words of Simeon in the Nunc dimittis recall that salvation in Christ is for all. These texts, and their focus on the world's salvation, are a microcosm of the work of the wider Office.

In the case of the Mass, too, the rites were informed by the practice of Jewish worship in the Temple and derived from the Last Supper shared by Jesus and his disciples, which he commanded them to re-enact in his memory. It does not escape notice that the Last Supper was a Passover meal, which recalled the liberation of the Israelites by God from slavery. Most importantly, Jesus's words "this is my body ... this is the chalice of my blood" led to a doctrine which held that his body and blood were rendered present in the species of bread and wine (the so-called doctrine of "transubstantiation"). The sacrifice of Jesus for the world on the Cross encouraged an understanding of the

Mass, the re-enactment itself, as a sacrifice. While Christ's passion and death were themselves full, perfect, and sufficient, the priest's sacrifice of the Mass was offered on behalf of those present, and he was the vessel by which God's grace was conveyed to the faithful. Presence at the Mass was more important than external forms of participation. Again, the fundamental form of the Mass was shared across Western Christianity, with the Roman Rite predominant (of which the several versions popular in medieval England were local dialects). But regional and local practices, especially in terms of ritual and less important textual components, were frequent.

In both Mass and Office, the form of service and the words were precisely specified and long ingrained in the minds of the faithful, with the basic structure and the "Ordinary" texts remaining from day to day, and particular texts, called the "Proper," serving to reflect upon the current place in the times and seasons of the year.

Two cycles through the liturgical year governed what took place from day to day: the "Temporale" of Christological seasons and feasts (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost) and the "Sanctorale" or cycle of saints' days. These cycles also interacted with the agricultural year (which governed much of the timetable of a rural community) and with locally significant dates and devotions; special attention was accorded to the patron saint of a church and to any saints with local connexions. Churches were full of images, statues, and other foci for personal devotion as well as commemoration in the liturgy.

While it might seem that much of the liturgical text found in medieval service books was newly composed, the written propers mask the large quantity of psalms found throughout the Office which are usually specified without further comment. Furthermore, every service, and every

newly written text, could be seen as a gloss on the words and the stories of Scripture. There was much scope, even within rigidly regulated rites, for creativity and troping or expansion, often of existing materials but also seeking to mediate between them and new exegetical or theological ideas. A wide range of new texts, especially for newly created saints and for expanded rituals, were composed in the Middle Ages, to say nothing of the music (almost exclusively plainchant) which was the means by which most of the text was communicated. Polyphony was by far the exception rather than the rule, even in the later Middle Ages and even in large and important institutions. The indissoluble connexion between text and its musical setting aided memorization and learning, as well as being part of the resource on which a performer or singer could draw.

As Andrew Hughes has shown, one of the primary ways of discriminating between different kinds of liturgical material should be to separate text that is sung from text that is spoken, and it seems to be the case that “sungtext” (Hughes’s term)<sup>1</sup> is, within itself, more consistent and the text, at least, is less likely to vary.

Another obvious division should be seen between the Ordinary and the Proper of both Mass and Office. At Mass, the Ordinary included the Kyrie (a prayer for God’s mercy), Gloria (hymn of praise), Credo (the Creed or declaration of faith), Sanctus and Benedictus (an acclamation of God’s power and glory), and Agnus Dei (a prayer to Jesus the “lamb of God” for mercy and peace), as well as the prayers spoken by the priest which formed the centrepiece, or “Canon,” of the Mass, and numerous other prayers and texts spoken at each celebration. The Proper of the Mass included the Introit, or entrance chant; the Gradual, following the first reading; the Alleluia announcing the Gospel; the Offertory at the preparation of the altar; and the Communion antiphon. All these texts helped

the faithful to reflect on their place in their world and their relation to their God, and on feast days the special texts that were used were the source of understanding of the day's significance.

Each service of the Office had the recitation of the Psalms at its heart, with each psalm or group of psalms bookended by an antiphon, a short sung text sometimes borrowed from a psalm verse. As previously mentioned, Lauds, Vespers, and Compline had their Gospel canticles, too. The night office of Matins was divided into three "nocturns," each with a series of psalms and antiphons (spoken lessons from Scripture or the Church Fathers) and responsories (longer texts which often told their own story, and which were set to elaborate chants when the Office was sung). The Psalms followed a cycle, in which the recitation of the entire Psalter typically occupied one week's services.

The liturgy was also the means by which one's own life was hallowed. Babies were baptized, young people (and sometimes older ones) were confirmed, couples were married (reciting vows in English that would sound familiar to many today), clerks took holy orders, sinners were reconciled to God through confession and penance, and the sick were comforted (the so-called "last rites").

Some elements of the liturgy could be extremely familiar: the structure of Mass and Office, together with many of the prayers of the Mass, the canticles, and other common texts of the Office, were repeated daily. Many people would know these texts, how they sounded, and what they meant (and no doubt the common formulas of the music aided in this recognition). Other texts and chants, such as those of a feast day, might come up only once a year. As Mary Carruthers and others have shown, the memory as formed by medieval education could be very capacious, and the memories of liturgical

practitioners even more so. But in many cases reference would need to be made to a wide range of manuscripts which preserved the liturgical rites of the Church. As well as being the central reference for their contemporaries, liturgical books are the principal means by which we learn about what happened when people went to church. At the same time, we need to remember that what was in the books was probably referred to when needed, rather than word by word. For instance, a service book with melodies might be an aide-memoire for the cantor, the cleric in charge of the music, rather than a musical “score” from which all singers read directly.

In late medieval England the main books for the Mass were the Missal, or priest’s altar book, and the Gradual, which gave the chants sung by the choir. For the Office one could consult a Breviary (a book containing all the texts for the Office) or Antiphonal (which gave the texts which were sung, together with their melodies). Other books, such as Psalters, Sequentiaries, Hymnals, and Processionals (which contained specific types of material), might also be consulted or be on hand, and bishops probably had a volume containing the rites pertinent to them (a Pontifical). Most scholarly effort has been concentrated on these types of manuscripts and studying their textual and musical contents. Books of Hours are for personal use, although they contain votive offices and other extracted material which looks a good deal like liturgical text, and have been much examined because they are beautiful. Two of the most important volumes, though, are less well known by non-specialists. The first is the Customary, which explains the function and behaviour of members of (for instance) a cathedral foundation, together with specific instructions for the enactment of the Mass, Office, and the other rites. The other is the Ordinal, which gives similar instructions for the celebration of services, together with



setting out the choice and order of the texts in each service in brief.

As has been stated, religious communities observed their own liturgical patterns of texts, chants, and ritual: each Benedictine house, for instance, was independent of the others. But cathedrals which were not run by a religious order (so-called "secular" cathedrals), together with parish churches and other church buildings, were dependent on more widely shared patterns for worship, which encompassed not just the choice and order of texts and music but also the customs of the community.

It is in fact possible to see, in the average Breviary or Missal, a conspectus of all the parts of a service, but not always is every text set out word by word. This point helps us to remember the fact that the books were, in reality, reminders and references for their users, but no one read them from beginning to end. The average page of a Breviary might contain less than 30 per cent of the material that it prescribes: psalms, versicles, canticles, and many hymns would be so well known as to not require reading.

As a consequence, the versions of these services written in books were not, in the main, what people understood the liturgy to be. That was, in fact, what they celebrated day in and day out in church; the written witnesses were only ever imperfect realizations of the performed reality.

This has provoked a variety of scholarly problems for, unlike canonical texts with authors, where the authorial intention (!) and correct version can *sometimes* be revealed through study, liturgical manuscripts were by necessity both textually and musically flexible, variable in their contents, and unified mainly by their function as written prescriptions or records which relate to the performance of worship. Leaving aside the potential challenges of

philological enterprise (made particularly difficult for the rites of medieval England because of the destructive force of the English Reformation), it is difficult to say for certain what purpose any specific book might have had, or the extent of its textual authority.

The first orthodoxy I will dispute, in Chapter 1, is that the pre-eminent liturgical “uses,” which were themselves based on the patterns observed in important cathedral churches and which were eventually said to be used across great swathes of medieval England, were stable and unvarying in their details. In Chapter 2, I question the conventional understanding (fomented in the twentieth century) that pre-modern Christians were ignorant of the meaning and value of the rites at which they assisted faithfully, and suggest some alternative ways of thinking about their participation in the liturgy, aided by some of the chief medieval liturgical commentators. In the third chapter, I present some ways that existing scholarship on the liturgy in medieval England may be profitably used, and some possibilities for future work.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, *Medieval Manuscripts for Mass and Office*, xv.