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## Exploring the Origins and Survival of ‘Churching’ in England, and the Implications of This Practice for How the Historian Should Look Upon Religious Change and Secularisation

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### Abstract:

This article discusses the churching ceremony, popular throughout early-modern England and still performed until the 1960s, and looks at the reasons why it has remained a ritual that was used for so long by women after childbirth. The origins of the ceremony and the way in which it was viewed as a purification ceremony to shame women into getting churched have been discussed by some, however, others have argued that childbirth, lying-in and churching were times when women enjoyed a period in the company of other women away from the world of men. However, this article argues that the matriarchal pressure on daughters is often overlooked as the reason why many women got churched. The ritual started to fade away near the end of the 1960s; this decline can be used to look at the way in which women have been posited as the reason for the decline of Christianity in the Western world since the mid twentieth century.

The churching ceremony was originally described as a ritual of purification. Found in both the Catholic and the Protestant churches, it was popular throughout early-modern England and remained popular thereafter: it declined somewhat during the Restoration, but this lull was temporary.<sup>1</sup> There is substantial evidence of the survival of the ceremony well into the twentieth century, as many new mothers were still being churched after the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> The origins of the ceremony and the way in which it was viewed as a ‘purification rite’ to shame women into getting churched have been discussed by some. Others have argued that childbirth, lying-in and churching were times during which women enjoyed a period in the company of other women, away from the world of men. They believe women chose to get churched as it offered a comfort to new mothers after the frightening experience of childbirth.<sup>3</sup> However, the matriarchal pressure on daughters is often overlooked as the reason why many women got churched, even though this

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), pp.201-202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, passim.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

pressure was part of everyday life for many until after the Second World War. The ritual started to fade away near the end of the 1960s, and we can use this decline to analyse the way in which women have been 'posited' as the reason for the decline of 'Christianity in the West since the Second World War'.<sup>4</sup>

In early modern England, childbirth and the subsequent lying-in (or confinement) normally lasted about a month and was a collective social event in a reserved female space, which has important implications for the account of patriarchal relations. It was a time when women expected to offer support to each other as they witnessed each other's agonies.<sup>5</sup> The mother-to-be would invite her female friends, relatives and neighbourhood 'gossips'.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the father-to-be would prepare to spend his time elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> The woman here was 'moving into a different social space: away from the world of men,... and into the world of women'.<sup>8</sup> Childbirth was a ceremony in which women 'abolished male... authority, albeit temporarily'; childbirth and the confinement period were an opportunity to enjoy separateness and the exclusivity of female solidarity.<sup>9</sup> Adrian Wilson sees this as an instance of 'female counter-power'; a control over a ritual in which very few men had a say.<sup>10</sup> This is evidenced by Samuel Woodforde when he writes about his wife's second childbirth in 1664:

'They have got my wife out of her bed according to the country fashion; what they will do with her my God I cannot tell... Here is now in the house old Goodwife Tailor the midwife, Mrs Norton, Mrs Katherine and my cousin Joan Smith. The Lord make them helpful to thy poor handmaid.'<sup>11</sup>

The midwife, present from the first signs of labour, was the authority figure during childbirth, and was the only person touching the genitalia of the woman in labour. The other women would offer

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<sup>4</sup> Lynn Abrams, 'Mothers and daughters: negotiating the discourse on the 'good woman' in 1950s and 1960s Britain', in Nancy Christie, and Michael Gauvreau (eds.), *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2013), p.60.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex, and Subordination in England, 1500-1800* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1999), p.186.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict*, p.153.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.154.

<sup>9</sup> Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p.187.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict*, p.212.

<sup>11</sup> William Coster, 'Purity, Profanity, and Puritanism: The Churching of Women, 1500-1700', *Studies in Church History*, vol. 27 (1990), p.378.

support by way of providing alcoholic caudle to deaden the pain, warm compresses and encouragement. These were needed, as it was not uncommon for women at that time to be in labour for several days. The midwife's equipment was very minimal prior to the nineteenth century, and she had few tools to help the woman progress.<sup>12</sup> She would only call on a male practitioner, or surgeon, if she felt that the life of the mother or her child were in danger.<sup>13</sup>

In early modern England, childbirth was often a frightening experience; at the time it was regarded as something that a woman had to survive, rather than experience. Confinements were, for many women, 'dangerous, painful and unpleasant'.<sup>14</sup> Lack of general health care, poor diet or hard physical labour are amongst many reasons why pregnancy was viewed as a 'hardship'.<sup>15</sup> Both the infant mortality rate and the maternal death rate remained high until the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> Part of the problem was the lack of antenatal care, and the fact that midwives were not required to receive formal training in England until the Midwives Act of 1902.<sup>17</sup> To further add to the fear and pain women suffered in childbirth, effective anaesthetics were not available to anyone before the mid-nineteenth century 'and for poor women until considerably later'.<sup>18</sup>

After the birth, many early modern women practiced a period of lying-in, which seems to have varied on 'either side of the biblical norm of forty days', where, at first, only other women visited mother and child<sup>19</sup>. Over the period there was a gradual relaxation on the restriction of male visitors.<sup>20</sup> It is important to stress that lying-in may not have been universal; it is likely that it had only been the upper classes who could afford to stay home. William Coster believes it is not uncommon to 'find the view that the poor 'bring forth without great difficulty and in a short time after rising from their bed, return to their wonted labour', while the rich 'partaked of die Divine Curse after a more severe manner'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe: Everyday Ritual and Magic in Pre-Modern Europe* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000), p.165.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1984), p.107.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe*, p.150.

<sup>16</sup> Roberts, *A Woman's Place*, p.104.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe*, p.166.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.254.

<sup>20</sup> Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p.187.

<sup>21</sup> Coster, 'Purity, Profanity and Procrastination', p.379.

He also brings attention to the belief, which did not have any precedent in canon law, that women who had been in childbirth were ‘excluded from religious fellowship for a period of one month’.<sup>22</sup> When the lying-in period was over, typically after a month, the new mother would have a churching ceremony which was the only means by which, following childbirth, a woman could return to her community church.<sup>23</sup> Though the practice of lying-in did not necessarily last until the day of the churching ceremony, many women did adhere to a period of confinement between the birth and the churching.

Churching was an ecclesiastical ceremony where a woman who had recently given birth was re-introduced into religious and social life ‘by means of a special rite’.<sup>24</sup> The biblical origins of churching lie in Leviticus 12, but more directly through the story of the purification of the Virgin in Luke 2. Luke 2:22 states that ‘when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord’.<sup>25</sup>

As the verse highlights, Mary completed a ‘purification’ ritual after birth. She and Joseph then brought Jesus to Jerusalem, ‘to present Him to the Lord’.<sup>26</sup> The fact that this purification ceremony was still being performed in churches many centuries later, indicates a low general opinion of pregnancy, childbirth, and women. Coster posits that ‘the rite, its trappings and focus were almost penitential’.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this is apparent as shame, discipline and exclusion were found in many branches of the Christian church in early modern England.<sup>28</sup> For centuries, Eve’s disobedience was a legacy used to criticise a woman’s sexual health, pregnancy, and childbirth.<sup>29</sup> For example, superstitions about menstruating women and the dangerous powers they might exercise remained embedded in English culture during the Victorian Era, and continued to surface until the twentieth century. Anthony Fletcher discusses an account of a letter published in *The Lancet* in 1974, a weekly

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<sup>22</sup> Coster, ‘Purity, Profanity and Procrastination’, p.380.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.377.

<sup>24</sup> Natalie Knödel, ‘The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, commonly called The Churching of Women’, *The University of Durham* (April 1995), p.1.

<sup>25</sup> The Bible, ‘Christ Born of Mary’, *Bible.com* <<https://www.bible.com/en-GB/bible/114/LUK.2.nkjv>> [accessed 24/11/2017].

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Coster, ‘Purity, Profanity and Procrastination’, p.384.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Houlbrooke, *Rite Out of Time: A Study of the Churching of Women and its Survival in the Twentieth Century* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2011), p.137.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

medical journal, which discusses flowers wilting in the hands of menstruating women.<sup>30</sup> Childbirth essentially rendered a woman impure, much like menstruation.<sup>31</sup> The example from 1974 makes the fact that the churching ritual survived the religious ‘upheavals’ of the sixteenth century unsurprising, as it indicates that there continued to be the belief that, after giving birth, women were ‘both unclean and unholy’.<sup>32</sup>

The biblical precedents led to the adoption of the rite of purification into liturgy around the eleventh century.<sup>33</sup> However, Coster proposes that the universality of similar rites could suggest that the introduction of this ceremony ‘was a response to popular feelings, rather than the imposition of a new ceremony on an increasingly Christianized society’.<sup>34</sup> Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* argues in a similar direction and posits that it would be a more justified view to understand the ritual of churching as ‘the result of superstitious popular opinions rather than as its cause’.<sup>35</sup>

It would be easy to argue that the churching of women was personally insulting.<sup>36</sup> During the ceremony, women were seated in a special churching pew at the front of the church in full view of the congregation. The pew was ‘like a huge box’, and must have made churching a terrifying experience for the person concerned’.<sup>37</sup> But this perhaps ignores the evidence that many women continued to conform with the ceremony as ‘a social necessity’.<sup>38</sup> In the 1950s, sociologists working in East London found that over 90% of mothers still participated in the ceremony.<sup>39</sup>

This brings us to the core of the debate concerning the nature of the churching of women; between those who see it as it was titled in the 1552 Prayer Book, as ‘The Thanks Giving of Woman After Childbirth’, and those that view it as ‘The Order for the Purification of Women’, seen in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer.<sup>40</sup> Thomas concludes that, in early modern England, popular superstitions, the magical elements of Psalm 121; ‘the sun shall not burn you by day, neither the moon by night’,

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<sup>30</sup> Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination*, p.63.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Wilson, *The Magical Universe*, p.253.

<sup>32</sup> Coster, ‘Purity, Profanity and Procrastination’, p.377.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Knödel, ‘The Thanksgiving of women after childbirth’, p.3.

<sup>36</sup> Coster, ‘Purity, Profanity and Procrastination’, p.386.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.383.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.386.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.382.

the wearing of a veil, and Puritan objections to the rite suggests we can speak of a ritual of purification.<sup>41</sup> It was these magical and superstitious elements that were criticised by the Puritans, as they believed the churching ritual to be ‘an unreformed purification’, while at the same time arguing that churching was a patriarchal instrument for the desecration of women.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars see churching ‘as a cultural response to the fear of women, and as a man-made instrument for their control’.<sup>43</sup> In his essay on churching, Coster concludes that the rite, its trappings and focus were a reflection of the mistrust of women.<sup>44</sup> Others, like Thomas, consider churching an unpopular practice to which the majority of woman surrendered.<sup>45</sup>

However other scholars, like Susan Wright and Adrian Wilson, believe that many women used the churching ceremony as an opportunity to socialise and celebrate with their female friends.<sup>46</sup> This argument shifts the attention away from men to the experience of the women themselves; a way of comfort after the fears of pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>47</sup> Adrian Wilson, who has gone even further in this direction, contends that ‘neither the newly delivered mother nor the women who accompanied her to church behaved "as if they felt her to be impure"’.<sup>48</sup> Churching instead was a social gathering and the conclusion of the lying-in period. For Wilson, churching was a ceremony where women resisted patriarchal power and regained a sense of power over their bodies and their lives.<sup>49</sup> He evidences that, after the Reformation, when the Protestant church changed the medieval Catholic title of ‘purification’ ritual to ‘the thanksgiving of women after childbirth’, and when Puritans saw the change as a ‘token gesture’ for something that was part of the old, Catholic ways, women continued to get churched.<sup>50</sup> Even women who could not necessarily afford the offerings given to

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<sup>41</sup> David Cressy, ‘Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women in Post-Reformation England’ *Past & Present*, 141 (1993), pp.106-46, pp.108-109.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>43</sup> Cressy, p.109.

<sup>44</sup> Coster, ‘Purity, Profanity and Procrastination’, p.386.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Wright, "Family Life and Society in Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Century Salisbury" (Univ. of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 1982), p.154.

<sup>47</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, p.131.

<sup>48</sup> Cressy, ‘Purification, Thanksgiving and the Churching of Women’, p.110.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict*, p.175.

the church for churching, or the subsequent celebration of such, did still have a churching ceremony.<sup>51</sup>

It is argued, however, that many women might have felt pressured to have a churching ceremony due to expectations from matriarchal figures. These not only include mothers, grandmothers and other female family members, but also neighbours and the town's gossips.<sup>52</sup> Margaret Houlbrooke agrees, that 'by insistence, example, powerful expectation, persuasion, or occasional threats', mothers and grandmothers saw to it that new mothers got churched.<sup>53</sup> For many women, their mothers' advice was the main reason for women to get churched and this strong influence lasted well into the twentieth century. Peter Willmott and Michael Young still found a churching rate of 95% in East London in the late 1950s.<sup>54</sup> Even up until the early 1970s, all but one woman in a large British maternity ward took up the offer of being churched by an Anglican minister.<sup>55</sup>

From the 1960s onwards, however, we do start to see a gradual disappearance of 'the construct of femininity', which previously positioned women as dependent, self-sacrificing, and 'not in control of her own body'.<sup>56</sup> Whereas before, mothers had great influence over their daughters' lives; girls now left the home for training or studying and in turn became less socially isolated.<sup>57</sup> Daughters were pursuing paths different from their mothers and ceased to live their lives as just pious, 'good' women.<sup>58</sup> This was regarded by the Church as a rejection of Christian values, but for the women themselves, the religious discourses of femininity, such as the rituals previously practiced by their mothers, 'had been reduced to a series of platitudes... to present the correct face to the world'.<sup>59</sup> Callum Brown believes gender to be central to the debate on religious decline in the West, as women were numerically dominant 'among church members' in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and piety was primarily located in the domestic sphere.<sup>60</sup> The 'feminizing of the secularisation process' might be the key to explain religious decline as, from the 1960s, it had to

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<sup>51</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict*, pp.178-179.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

<sup>53</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, pp.127-128.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Adrian Wilson, *The Magical Universe*, p.203.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>57</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, p.128.

<sup>58</sup> Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters', p.79.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.80.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

compete with ‘alternative sources of identity for women’; found in the workplace, through education, and in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>61</sup> No longer did a woman’s life revolve around family and the home. Instead, they became free to pursue lives that their mothers were never able to pursue before, and ‘religion ceased to provide a framework’ for the way women lived their lives.<sup>62</sup> One of the justifications of churching, its offer of comfort after the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, had already been undermined by the improvements in the management of maternity and childbirth from the early twentieth century onwards, and after the Second World War these improvements had reached most women in England.<sup>63</sup>

The decline of religion was concomitant with the decline in the number of women who were churched and Houlbrooke believes it is arguably one of the clearest symptoms of how we should look at the growth of secularisation in the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>64</sup>

The church did continue to be treasured by many women, however, even its members ‘were allowing the ceremony of churching to fade away’.<sup>65</sup> Some clergy had already re-worded the phrase and started using ‘bless’ rather than ‘church’ in the 1950s.<sup>66</sup> Houlbrooke points out that, because the written record is incomplete, it is hard to measure the rate of churching decline.<sup>67</sup> However, through clerical comments, personal impressions and parish statistics, we can determine that the old rite of churching changed for good and ‘modern ceremonies’ took its place.<sup>68</sup> The liturgy of the Church of England saw a revision in 1980 and 2000, where the churching rite was replaced by the new thanks giving service, which appears to be more joyful and inclusive; a well-deserved celebration of the achievement of giving birth.<sup>69</sup>

As discussed, childbirth, lying-in and churching were all part of a female ritual, where women could support each other as they witnessed the other’s agonies. This created a ‘female counter-power’ that

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<sup>61</sup> Abrams, ‘Mothers and Daughters’, p.60.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>63</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, p.131.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.132.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp.132-136.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.136.

provided women with control over something which was not ruled by men.<sup>70</sup> Adrian Wilson argues churching was a ritual not imposed by men, but rather by women; women wanted to take part in the rite, as it 'legitimized and completed the wider ceremony of childbirth.'<sup>71</sup> We cannot deny, however, that churching was called a purification ritual, in which a woman was brought back into the fold by way of cleansing her in front of the congregation, as posited by William Coster. Nonetheless, as Margaret Houlbrooke has argued, matriarchal opinions also added to the pressure for women to partake in the churching ceremony; women still enjoyed close proximity and frequent association with their mothers until the late 1950s.<sup>72</sup>

In the early 1960s, we start to see a change in the way in which people experienced religion; women became less dependent on the church and the influence of their mothers and grandmothers. Instead, professional skills replaced the reassurances of the church. The rates of infant mortality and maternal death declined due to better hospital facilities and trained midwives and doctors, in addition to a focus on antenatal care.<sup>73</sup> Gender is central to the debate on religious decline in the West, as it was women who were the majority of those attending churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, and the feminine quality of Christian religiosity 'identified women as the moral core of the family and society'.<sup>74</sup> Religion was replaced by 'personal identity formation' in the period after the Second World War and ceased to be the sole marker to identify oneself with.<sup>75</sup>

The churching rite was written out of the Church of England's liturgy in the revisions of 1980 and 2000.<sup>76</sup> For centuries, the disobedience of Eve was a legacy with which to frame many strictures against women, among which the ritual of purification.<sup>77</sup> The decline of the churching rite is surely one of the clearest indicators of how the historian should look at evidence that suggests gender was a major factor in the growth of secularisation in England.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict*, p.212.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.210.

<sup>72</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, p.127.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.131-132.

<sup>74</sup> Abrams, 'Mothers and Daughters', p.60.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, p.133.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

Gender-based prejudices are still found in many branches of the Christian church today.<sup>79</sup> However, with the demise of the purification rite in England, the churching ritual was replaced by ceremonies that were aimed at celebration instead of shame.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Houlbrooke, *Rite out of Time*, pp.137-138.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138.

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