



# Pfaff at Fifty

## New Devotions and Religious Change in Later Medieval England

A Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature  
two-day conference

**2–3 July 2020, University of Nottingham**

Originally published in 1970, Richard W. Pfaff's *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* fundamentally

changed the way humanities scholars thought and wrote about English religious development in the long fifteenth century. Pfaff asked important questions about the process by which the new devotions that focused on Christ and the Virgin entered the liturgy in England and how a liturgical feast was 'promulgated—at all the levels to make it effective—or accepted'. Moreover, he emphasised the gradual pace of liturgical change and its different stages. Pfaff explored the relationship between liturgical and extra-liturgical devotions; demonstrated the variation in the pace and extent of regional, local and institutional change; and promoted the idea of the push and pull of popular demand for change in place of the traditional notion of official promulgation from above. Most importantly, even though he was a liturgical scholar with deep, specialised knowledge of the material evidence and an intense insight into the practice of the period, Pfaff opened study of the cultural impact of these devotions to scholars of many adjacent fields. It is in honour of this wide sowing that we now gather, fifty years on, to reap and to share.

*New Liturgical Feasts* documented a process of increased elaboration and enhancement in fifteenth-century English liturgy that would have profoundly impacted the experience of church-going parishioners throughout the realm. Pfaff saw this as evidence of 'liturgical vitality' rather than of 'an over-complicated and decadent system which was shortly to collapse through its own burdensomeness' (p. 131). He called for scholars interested in 'the whole of later medieval spirituality' to consider both private devotion and 'what goes on in the church' (p. 132). In the five decades since 1970, we have witnessed a very considerable flourishing of research—conducted across many disciplines—on a wide range of aspects of late medieval religious life. These include, among others, lay piety, the importance of gender in shaping religious belief and practice, religious observance in parish and cathedral churches, the religious orders, saints' cults, mysticism, devotional reading, the material culture of religion, and heterodoxy and heresy. Pfaff's pioneering study opened new pathways and provided a new impetus for scholars to explore religious culture as a whole in all its variety. As a result, fifty years after *NLF*'s publication, we have a much greater appreciation of the vitality, as well as the complexity, of late medieval religion.

'Pfaff at Fifty' aims to take stock of the enduring legacy of *New Liturgical Feasts* by reconsidering the important questions that this touchstone book raised. We invite abstracts that address the themes, questions, and implications of Pfaff's book in the light of new research. We encourage submissions from scholars working in any relevant discipline or field, including history, theology, art history, literary studies, archaeology, gender studies, musicology, and manuscript studies.

Please submit abstracts of no more than 300 words and a short biographical note to either of the email addresses listed below by **1 October 2019**.

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Papers should be no more than 20 minutes in length. We will also consider the proposal of complete panels (i.e. three papers of 20 minutes or four of 15 minutes), provided that the submission includes separate abstracts for each paper. Scholars intending to submit abstracts might find the following list of questions, themes and topics helpful, but papers that address relevant issues not mentioned here are of course also welcomed.

- New research or new perspectives on the ‘Nova Festa’ that Pfaff studied in *New Liturgical Feasts*, including the Transfiguration, the Visitation, and the Holy Name of Jesus; as well as the Passion-centred devotions to the Five Wounds, the Crown of Thorns, the Virgin’s Compassion, and the Presentation of the Virgin.
- Private vs public devotion vis-à-vis the new devotions
- Variation in devotional practices between provinces, dioceses, religious orders, religious houses, geographical areas, and localities.
- The relationship between new devotions to Christ, to the Virgin, and to saints throughout the long fifteenth century.
- The impact of new devotions on parish and cathedral churches and on the religious practices and experiences of the laity.
- Patronage of new devotions by the laity, including the crown, nobility, and gentry.
- The religious orders and the new devotions—clergy and monastics.
- Networks of patronage between court, household, diocese, and locality.
- Interaction between popular observance and official promulgation.
- The relationship between English and continental devotional innovations
- The importance of confraternities and collegiate foundations for adoption and promulgation.
- Investment in liturgy and its relationship to investment in other types of religious ‘goods’ such as devotional books, church building, art, etc.
- The ‘mechanics’ of liturgical innovation in parish and cathedral churches.
- The relationship between liturgical texts and other types of religious texts.
- The possible reasons for, and implications of, increasing liturgical and devotional elaboration in fifteenth-century England, including questions of ‘vitality’, ‘over-elaboration’, ‘luxuriance’, and ‘exoticism’.
- The impact of increasing literacy and devotional reading on lay experience of, and participation, in the liturgy.
- Continental influences on English liturgical development.
- The relationship of images and their proliferation to the ‘Nova Festa.’
- Church music and the new devotions.
- The sensory experience of the liturgy in the context of increasing ritual elaboration.
- Biographical work on key figures in the development of ‘Nova Festa’ (such as Lady Margaret Beaufort, Richard Rolle, Richard Scrope, etc).
- The ‘Nova Festa’ and the Reformation.
- The impact of print on liturgical change.
- The material culture of liturgical elaboration.

The ‘Pfaff at Fifty’ conference will be held over Thursday 2 and Friday 3 July 2020 at the University of Nottingham. It will include an optional conference dinner as well as more informal gatherings. A variety of accommodation is available on University Park Campus as well as off-campus in Nottingham. Variable registration rates will be available depending on accommodation requirements. More details will be made available on the conference website in due course.