

STUDIES IN CHURCH HISTORY

EDITED BY W.J. SHEILS AND DIANA WOOD

VOLUME 23

VOLUNTARY RELIGION

For the Ecclesiastical History Society
BASIL BLACKWELL

STUDIES IN CHURCH HISTORY

Volume 23

Voluntary Religion

Edited by W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood

The essays in this volume look at the rich history of groups and societies which have sought to fulfil a religious purpose outside or alongside the official Churches. Often such groups, whether they were the medieval fraternities, charitable bodies such as the St. Vincent de Paul society, or supra-denominational organisations like the Oxford Group, have expressed to the individual a more immediate and lively sense of religious commitment than membership of a Church itself. Whether such groups saw themselves as merely supplementing the life of the Church or whether, like the puritan conventicles, they represented a particular tradition within the Church and hoped to bring the parent body round to their view, tension was likely to exist between the Church authorities and members of these groups. In the case of the Methodists this led to the establishment of an alternative Church, whilst among medieval heretical groups persecution was often the fate of their adherents. Among the Lollards, Familists and early Dissenters, however, membership of a select religious body did not always exclude participation in the civil and social life of the community. By contrast, in the missionary context at a later date, membership of a voluntary society must sometimes have appeared to the worker in the field as subjection to a distant master. To some degree voluntary religion involved a dual allegiance to both group and Church and the essays in the volume explore both the tension resulting from that duality and also the meaning and function of the sociability which is so characteristic of voluntary religious societies and which meant so much to their members.

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PAPERS READ AT
THE 1985 SUMMER MEETING AND
THE 1986 WINTER MEETING OF
THE ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY SOCIETY

EDITED BY

W. J. SHEILS
AND
DIANA WOOD

PUBLISHED FOR
THE ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY SOCIETY

BY

BASIL BLACKWELL

1986

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Voluntary religion.—(Studies in church history; v. 23)

1. Church charities—Great Britain—History
I. Sheils, W.J. II. Wood, Diana III. Series
267'.0941 BV4404.G7

ISBN 0-631-15054-4

Printed in Great Britain by Billing & Sons Limited, Worcester

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