

Extract from Professor John Craig on *Lifecycle*

# LIFECYCLE

Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Church's **rites**, ceremonies, and prayers celebrated and defined the central passages of the life cycle. From the **christening** of infants to their **confirmation** in youth, the marriage of consenting couples and the **burial** of the departed, these moments were defined and understood by Christian **theology** and interpreted by the Church's ministers (see **Sacraments**; **Death and Dying**). These practices were old, and their retention throughout the early modern period reflected the strength of continuity. But the religious changes that swept through England (see **Context**) brought significant changes to the rites attending the life cycle. Where the pre-**Reformation** church had surrounded the living with seven **sacraments**, the reformers reduced these to two: **baptism** and the **eucharist**. Marriage and last rites were stripped of their sacramental status. Only baptism remained a sacrament and in **Protestant** England, this rite, along with all the rest, was simplified, performed in the **vernacular** and pruned of the symbolic elements expelling the **devil**.

It is something of a paradox that at the same time that reformers desecralised key passages of the life cycle, the royal supremacy over the church and the requirement to keep parish registers resulted in the creation of historical records of christenings, marriages, and burials that are the bedrock of our understanding of the early modern life cycle.

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**Marginal details of Death taking a Nurse and a Countrywoman, with verses on death.**

Origin/Date: London || 1569

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## Key:

**Interactive glossary terms**

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