Introduction

I am always very well pleased with a Country Sunday.

This book will consider the practice and social context of established religion in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England. In its detailed description of worship in the parish of Sir Roger de Coverley, The Spectator provides one picture of the manner in which the social relations between the elites, the clergy and the people were expressed through religion. The fictional Tory squire took pains to encourage his villagers and tenants to worship in the parish church in a suitably decent and conformable manner. Sir Roger gave each member of the congregation a Prayer Book and a hassock so that they could kneel and join in the responses. He raised the altar and had religious texts written on the walls, encouraged psalmody, rewarded with a Bible those children who performed their catechism well, and provided the parson with a supply of printed sermons to read in church. Sir Roger also took care to keep the congregation in good order, interrupting the service to chide malefactors, and standing up during prayers to check that his tenants were all present. In his support for the liturgy and scripture, for seemly worship and the edification of the catechism, Sir Roger de Coverley represented one ideal of worship within the eighteenth-century Church of England.¹

Coverley parish exemplifies the dependency, or social control, thesis, according to which the landed elites and the clergy were united in an alliance which was to their mutual interest. In return for the Church’s support of the social and political establishment, the landed gentry defended the worship and privileges of the Church of England. This interpretation, which informs the work of historians as far apart ideologically as E. P. Thompson and J. C. D. Clark, remains the orthodox view of the relations between church and society in eighteenth-century England.² Religion is thought to have been generally under the control of the

¹ The Spectator, no. 112, 9 July 1711.
The dependency thesis fuses two dichotomies which historians have developed in order to help them understand the social significance of culture in early modern England: one between popular and elite culture, and another between popular and official religion. Although parallel, these dichotomies are nevertheless distinct. Proponents of the binary model of popular and elite culture argue that the two became increasingly polarised during the early modern period. The elites not only withdrew from popular culture but they also sought to suppress its rituals and festivals. The seventeenth-century campaign of the godly against the recreations and good fellowship of their neighbours was one aspect of this cultural war. The two-tiered model has been the subject of extensive criticism on at least two grounds. First, the division of society into only two categories—elite and people—oversimplifies the complexities of the structure of society and raises questions about how each should be defined. E. P. Thompson’s elite is different from that of Keith Wrightson, for example. One corrective has been the suggestion that the middling sort, including tradesmen...
and substantial farmers, should be regarded as a separate category. This has the advantage of recognising the significant role that the middling sort played in local administration and prosecution. Yet it does little to remedy the second objection to the model, its emphasis upon cultural conflict rather than consensus. Critics have instead emphasised the extent to which different groups in society shared cultural phenomena and redefined them in their own terms. Rather than debating the validity of the two-tiered model, it seems more productive to explore cultural interactions between the people and the elite. As we shall see, religion was also a focus of negotiation between different social groups and cannot be viewed merely in terms of polarisation or the enforcement of elite hegemony.

The dichotomy between popular and official religion has been more persistent. A recent synthesis, while recognising the range of religious views, has restated this opposition by describing the religion of the majority of the population in terms of Pelagianism and folklorised Christianity. Historians have found it difficult to believe that the Church of England could have exemplified popular religion, a view which the debate over the popularity of the sixteenth-century Reformation has appeared to validate. Revisionists have argued that Protestantism led to the dissociation of the people from official religion, so that a popular religion informed by residual elements of Catholicism existed outside the Church. Yet this interpretation can be questioned on several counts. First, it views lay religious practice through the eyes of contemporary critics, including both evangelical Protestants and other clergy, and therefore accepts their post-Reformation value judgements. Each imposed a Manichaean framework upon the world, praising those who conformed to their own high standards of behaviour, while condemnation everyone else. Indeed, this binary opposition between sheep and goats, elect and reprobate, is fundamental to Christianity. The puritans merely took the dichotomy to extremes in their belief that it might be possible to identify the small number who were elect on this earth. The truly godly were indeed a minority in the early seventeenth century, but this does not mean that all those with religious commitment were. In the late seventeenth century, complaints from clergymen about the irreligious behaviour of their congregations have a familiar air and are no more reliable.

11 Reay, Popular Cultures, p. 100. See also K. V. Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (New York, 1971); D. Cressy, Birth, Marriage and Death (Oxford, 1997).
13 Matthew 25.
14 See chapter 8.
A second reason for questioning the dissociation of popular from official religion is that there is growing evidence of popular support for the Church of England before, during and after the Civil Wars. This evidence suggests heartfelt support for the Prayer Book and the clergy from a broad spectrum of groups in society. By the early seventeenth century, many parishioners had accepted the Anglican liturgy and defined religious worship in terms of its rites and ceremonies. The strength of support for a church is often best demonstrated by its persistence during times of persecution. During the Civil Wars and Interregnum, the Prayer Book continued to be used in some parishes even though it had been proscribed by Parliament. A small proportion of parishes also continued to celebrate communions at feasts such as Easter, although this practice was discouraged. The survival of these practices, although limited, compares favourably with the rapid response of parishes to the twists and turns of central ecclesiastical policy in the middle of the sixteenth century. The efficiency of the enforcement of the Reformation and the Marian reaction and the chaos of the Interregnum no doubt explain some of the differences, but clear evidence of support for the Prayer Book remains, nevertheless. This support was reaffirmed by the rapid return to communion at festivals in 1659 and particularly in 1660. When ecclesiastical visitations began again in 1662, parishes moved rapidly to remedy faults left by fifteen years of enforced neglect.

Recent research has employed innovative approaches to uncover further evidence for the vitality of a popular religious culture which incorporated elements of Protestant belief and practice. Tessa Watt’s study of cheaply printed broadsides and chapbooks looks outside the church to the streets where ballads were sold, into houses, and even on the walls of alehouses. She finds that conservative and reformed themes were often fused in the extensive religious literature that continued to predominate in the years from 1550 to 1640. Ronald Hutton’s study of the ritual year returns attention to the church by focusing on its use of financial resources. His analysis of churchwardens’ accounts shows how both religious and secular festive years were reformed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although the Revolution and Interregnum had seen the temporary triumph of the long campaign of Protestant reformers against the religious and secular festive calendar, a flourishing festive culture after the Restoration

18 See chapter 3.
demonstrated the Church’s ‘capacity for local choice and innovation’, a sign of vigour and lay support. There is little evidence that the Reformation created a dissociation of popular from official religion. The religious culture of the majority of the population could not help being influenced by the Reformation as new patterns of worship emerged and became familiar. Popular religion, in other words, was not static but evolved to meet new circumstances, incorporating elements of official religion in the process, although not necessarily in a form which the Church would have recognised.

Watt finds little in pre-Civil War cheap print ‘about double predestination, ecclesiastical vestments, the position of the altar, or the prerequisites for communion’, although she notes that these needs may have been met elsewhere. Her findings suggest that the dissociation thesis may also be criticised for placing too much weight upon the search for popular support for particular theological positions and ceremonial practices such as the sacrament of grace or doctrine of purgatory. In practice, the majority of the people had little interest in the theological debates which occupied some of the more highly educated members of the population. In this sense, at least, the dichotomy between official and popular religion is valid, but it tells us little about the religion of the people. The ambiguities within the Thirty-Nine Articles and the liturgy must, in any case, have made it difficult for many people to understand the Church’s doctrinal stance. The Church’s lack of doctrinal cohesion after the Restoration gave communal participation in common prayer particular importance to Anglicans.

In studying the religion of the people, it is necessary to distinguish between religious belief, knowledge, experience, practice and secular impact. Because these various aspects of religion are interrelated, it is natural to assume that they operate in parallel, so that one may serve as an indicator for the others. The scarcity of available evidence makes such an approach particularly attractive. Religious practice is often easier to study than belief, knowledge or experience. Yet some faiths vest greater importance in certain aspects of religion than in others. One consequence of the Reformation was to give particular emphasis to belief, through the doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and salvation by faith, and to personal piety within the family. This does not mean that this shift in emphasis was universally, or even generally, accepted. For many people, participation in church services and activities remained the single most
important focus for religious experience, as well as providing a forum for social relationships.

This study will investigate the social significance of religion through popular involvement in institutional religion, exploring the extent to which people were committed to the Established Church, the quality of their relations with the clergy, and the role of religion as a focus for social relationships. Historians have tended to emphasise the importance of voluntary religion from the seventeenth century onwards and the emergence of organised dissent after 1662. The confirmation of its status in 1689 may appear to confirm this interpretation. Yet in sketching the evolution of the English separatist tradition, there is a danger of writing the past in terms of later developments. Dissent was created by the political and religious establishment. Relatively few people set out deliberately to separate themselves from the Church. One reason why it is so difficult to agree about the definition of ‘puritans’ is that they constituted a significant section of the national church, which most people found it unthinkable to leave. Richard Baxter agreed that so-called ‘conventicles’ should be viewed ‘not as a separated Church but as a part of the Church more diligent than the rest’. Even after the Restoration, the great majority of parishioners wished to remain within the Church. Thus the religious census of 1676, which enumerated stubborn nonconformists, found that only a minority of the population fitted into the category. Lay officers proved reluctant to prosecute neighbours who attended conventicles or consistently stayed away from church. The unpopularity of informers under the second Conventicle Act is partly explained by the fact that their net might ensnare those who attended both church and a conventicle as well as separatists. The religious societies, first formed in the 1670s, followed in the 1690s by the SPCK and later by the Methodists for many years, demonstrated the same determination to remain within the Church. In short, while voluntarism was a minority instinct, the desire to remain a member of a unified church remained strong for most people, and was stronger than concern about ceremonial details or remote doctrinal debates. Indeed, this belief in the value of universal membership of one unified church was a feature of religious culture that members of all social groups shared.
Parishioners expressed their commitment to membership in the Church by participating in its weekly public assemblies each Sunday and in the communal rites of baptism, marriage and burial. It may be objected that they had little choice because their observance of these offices was enforced by law and therefore was not voluntary. Until 1689 persistent absence from church could lead to prosecution and punishment by a fine. Yet it seems unlikely that for over a century the majority of the population attended church solely because they were compelled to do so. The best evidence for commitment to the services of the Church is that the laity complained when clerical neglect meant that services either were not performed or were inadequate. When they were given an opportunity to contribute actively, for example by singing psalms, they did so eagerly. The penal laws also present a practical difficulty, because the correctional courts which provide the best window into religious observance were heavily involved in the prosecution of nonconformists. Not everyone who appeared before the church courts or who quarrelled with their minister was a nonconformist.

Worship in church had spiritual and social significance. By attending services, parishioners affirmed their membership of both the national church and the local community. Interpretations which emphasise enforcement and social control understate the extent to which all members of the parish participated in institutional religion. This is not to say that the Church of England defined all popular beliefs. Popular religion constituted a blend of official and unofficial beliefs, which differed from individual to individual. A folklorised and magical world view lived alongside Anglicanism, while other ritual practices lost their religious connotations. The church was a focus for social relationships. In the layout of its pews, the church replicated the hierarchical structure of society. Yet the parish church touched all sections of society. Every inhabitant, ratespayer and tithe payer had an interest in the provision of prayers and in the good government of the parish. Religion provided an important focus for negotiation between different groups in society. While it could be a force for division, it also had the potential to represent a shared culture that mediated relationships between members of different groups in society. The relationship between the parson, who was the local representative of the national church, and his congregation was particularly important.

A final reason to question the view that the sixteenth-century Reformation alienated the people from official religion is that another set of historians has identified the latter half of the eighteenth century as the crucial period when the

Church suffered a devastating loss of grass-roots support. Alan Gilbert describes the period from 1740 to 1800 as one of ‘prolonged, rapid, and disastrous’ decline for the Church of England. The number of communicants in selected Oxfordshire parishes fell by 25 per cent between 1738 and 1802. In the north they fell by almost 18 per cent in only twenty years. By 1851, the Church of England accounted for a minority of worshippers in most places, and even in Anglican bastions such as the county of Wiltshire it accounted for little more than half of those attending religious services. Students of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Church have long been divided between optimists and pessimists. The pessimistic school follows earlier reformers who viewed the eighteenth century as one of the blackest ages of church history. The Church could not avoid the stain of ‘Old Corruption’, and the political alliance between the Whig regime and the bishops made the latter appear to be little better than placemen. At the local level, a pluralist clergy who appeared more interested in the hunt than the pulpit must inevitably have neglected their pastoral duties. John Wesley summed up the criticisms against the Church and its clergy, ‘those indolent, pleasure taking, money-loving, praise-loving, preferment-seeking Clergymen’ who were ‘a stink in the nostrils of God’. His words echoed the critique of the Whig bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury half a century earlier. Complaining that the clergy were greedy and lax and that the church courts were corrupt, Burnet judged that the spirit of religion was ‘sunk and dead’.

Because the eighteenth-century Church was ‘a static institution, characterised by inertia’, it proved unable to cope with the rapid demographic growth and urbanisation that occurred later in the century, for these changes had their greatest impact in the industrialising north where it was least able to respond. The Church of England also suffered a decline in popular support in the south, as the clergy

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[37] R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700 (Oxford, 1977), pp. 22–3; Summary of Census of Religious Worship (1851), Table N; W. S. F. Pickering, ‘The 1851 religious census – a useless experiment?’, British Journal of Sociology 18 (1967): 396 (Map 1), 399 (Map 2). These figures are for the number of persons present at the most numerous service in each church or chapel. It is impossible to recover the total number of individuals who attended church on census Sunday, because of the danger of double-counting. See Smith, Religion in Industrial Society, pp. 250–2, and the references cited there, for a discussion of the census’s limitations.
consolidated their alliance with landed gentry and grew more distant from their congregations. The clergy became more prosperous, self-confident and powerful, changes that were matched by the growth in pluralism and clerical magistracy.42

Other historians have cast the eighteenth-century Church in a more favourable light. Norman Sykes long provided the dominant account, based upon qualified optimism.43 Sykes countered the view that the bishops were political creatures by demonstrating that they diligently performed their pastoral duties, particularly those of confirmation and the examination of candidates for the clergy. While he was not blind to the defects of the Church, he observed that many of its problems were not new. The eighteenth-century Church had many obstacles to overcome, including economic and institutional defects, many of which dated back to before the English Civil War, if not to before the Reformation.44 More recently, historians have taken an even more optimistic stance. It has been suggested that the Church ‘in the first half of the eighteenth century perhaps reached the zenith of its allegiance among the population’.45 The use of religious patronage for political purposes appears to have been neither as pernicious nor as effective as had been thought. Historians have also found considerable potential for pastoral care and lay piety in the late eighteenth century and have stressed the vitality of local Anglicanism, even in industrialising communities such as Oldham and Saddleworth, although this depended upon local initiatives and must be set in the context of the considerable success of aggressive evangelical churches.46

Although recent research suggests that the Church of England coped better than had previously been thought, it nevertheless lost ground, at least relative to other churches, during the eighteenth century. Why did it suffer this erosion of support? Structural, pastoral and economic factors played a part, as did competition from the evangelical churches. Yet it will be argued in this book that the key to the decline of the Church lies in the nature of relationships between the people and the clergy. Its origins can be found in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in the period between the Restoration and the birth of introductory text.
Methodism. It was in these years that the Church and its clergy revealed the rigidity of mind and the isolation from the laity that made them increasingly unable to command popular affection. The clergy did much to overcome the pastoral problems that confronted them. The early eighteenth century witnessed an Anglican revival that revealed the remarkable potential of the Church to provide the religion of the people. Yet the Church was ultimately unable to retain popular support because it was unwilling to relinquish any control over worship to the laity. Its problems were more psychological than structural. Indeed, its institutional defects reflected a clerical mindset that was defensive and inflexible. The Church repeatedly showed itself unable to change to meet circumstances. The parochial reforms of the Commonwealth were discarded. The liturgical changes that would have allowed presbyterians to be comprehended were discarded. For much of the period from 1660 to 1740 the Church was distracted by the threat from dissent. The quarrel between High and Low Church that came to a head in the reign of Queen Anne prevented the Church from confronting the real problems it faced, while making it many enemies. The SPCK, which initially sought to involve both High and Low Churchmen, became the target of accusations of Jacobitism. The greatest danger to the Church came not from without but from within. The clergy turned inwards, defining themselves as a distinct profession, determined to protect the liturgy and the monopoly over it which their unique sacerdotal status gave them. The closed mind of the Anglican clergy can be seen in the reaction to Methodism, initially a movement within the Church. The clergy disliked the impropriety of religious meetings held in the open, the singing and the greater involvement of the laity. Clerical inability to understand or accept popular worship mean that clerical complaints about religious ignorance cannot be relied upon as evidence of popular beliefs.

There are good reasons for starting this study in 1660, even though there undoubtedly were continuities between religion and politics under the early and later Stuarts. The Restoration of the Church of England alongside the Stuart monarchy provided it with the opportunity for a fresh start. After years of disorder, the restored Church was initially popular. Dissent created a new set of problems, but these were more institutional than theological, and puritanism no longer represented a serious threat within the Church. The end point in around 1740 is more controversial. The years 1688–1714 represent a continental divide which historians are reluctant to cross. It is true that 1689 marked the end of

50 Many of the books cited in this chapter either stop or start in the period 1688–1714, mostly 1688, e.g. Clark; Walsh, Haydon and Taylor, Wrightson and Levine; Spurr; Hylson-Smith, Virgin, Rule. Champion, Gilbert and Smith are notable exceptions.