Introduction

Research for this book began with the deceptively simple question: What was the impact of the Reformation on women? At the time it seemed a straightforward question to answer, and the lines of enquiry well established. In drawing up a balance sheet of the Reformation, the loss of Mary and the female saints had to be weighed against the protestant separation of virginity and sanctity. At the cost of creating a religious environment stripped of saintly female models, the new religion honoured married life and promoted the idea of the godly woman.

But, even at this stage, although the entries in the account book appeared obvious, the appropriate method of accountancy seemed elusive. How could one determine the significance of the psychological and inspirational importance of female saintly role models whose lives not only drew attention to the inadequacies of individual laywomen but also testified to the possibility of female sanctity and pious achievement despite the legacy of Eve? And how to balance this against the retreat from the promotion of the sacred value of virginity which was symbolised on the one hand by the closure of monasteries and nunneries, and on the other by the destruction of those same saint's cults that offered inspiring models of female religious potential? Since marriage was the fate of the majority of women, the answer initially seemed obvious. Surely a religious position that set its face against the christian unease with sex and childbirth and promoted the values of godly marriage must be accounted a positive advance for women, whatever the fate of those virgin saints tortured by pagan persecutors? And yet there was a nagging doubt. Extracts from godly advice literature in collections of early modern writings about women, often edited by crusading feminist historians, suggested that the protestant elevation of marriage heralded the enforcement of patriarchy and the subjection of wives to their husbands.

In the years since the first identification of these conflicting possibilities, striking a balance has often seemed no easier. The rather dismal, but nevertheless initially persuasive, conclusion of Collinson that the period was characterised by continuity rather than change, and that there was no history
of the family – nor presumably of gender – in the Reformation, seemed to threaten the very validity of the initial question. But a stress on continuity, though important, risks being too blunt a tool for assessing the gender impact of a process so complex as the Reformation, or indeed of any significant change in ideas and social practice. Granted, it is possible to identify patriarchal assumptions in most periods of English history, but this does not mean that there is no history of gender. What matters is the shifting emphases that create possibilities and opportunities of expression. To take an obvious example, it is important to note that the ‘puritan family’ was not a Reformation invention, but it is as important to realise that such ideas were much more insistently proselytised, presumably not without some effect, in that period. Moreover, this continuity can be seen as part of the strength of this strand of Reformation culture, which, whilst labelled puritan, was not entirely alien to a broader spectrum of religious opinion.

In religious terms too, this study stresses and defines the importance of continuity, without wishing to negate the significance of the Reformation impact. The altars were stripped, and parishioners were confronted with the need to make choices about maintaining religious traditions that had seemed natural but were now prohibited and derided. But we will not understand this process if we think in terms of the creation of unbridgeable worlds. The government of early modern England lacked the resources of a modern police state to secure speedy outward conformity to its edicts. Moreover, it is clear that neither charting the destruction and concealment of the apparatus of catholic devotion, dramatic though this was, nor drawing attention to early modern laments for the ‘merry world’ that had been lost with the imposition of the new religion, adequately captures the nature of this transition. Making windows into men’s souls is notoriously difficult, and was not the declared aim of the official Reformation, at least in its period of consolidation in the reign of Elizabeth I. Nevertheless, we need to go further in exploring the devotional psychology and to suggest ways in which people could cope with, and make sense of, a world in which some familiar contours had been erased, but many salient landmarks remained visible. Those historians who have focussed on the contrast between a religion primarily experienced through the image to one primarily apprehended through the word have made an important contribution to this task. Their work has defined the conceptual tools available to those trying to make sense of the new map, and has drawn attention to the permeability of oral and literate cultures in the early modern

Introduction

period. However, they have implicitly formulated the problem principally in terms of cognitive skills rather than of religious understanding.\textsuperscript{3}

Critics of anthropological theories of acculturation pointed out long ago that it is an adaptive process. New ideologies imposed by an elite are not swallowed whole but grafted on to previous understanding.\textsuperscript{4} Such arguments carry even stronger conviction in the context of early Reformation England where the laity, despite Duffy’s ‘traditional’ epithet, was far from passive in its religious choices.\textsuperscript{5} It supported a burgeoning market in devotional literature, took the lead in organising religious gilds, and adapted and fostered new devotions. Consequently, to understand the ‘impact of the Reformation’ we must think in terms of devotional transitions rather than leaps. This is complicated by the nature of much of the historiography of late medieval religion. Although convincing in their rehabilitation of the state of catholicism in the parishes of pre-Reformation England, such works largely take their lead from the agenda set by sixteenth-century anti-catholic polemic. Additionally, their concern is to delineate how parishioners’ experiences of catholicism were religiously satisfying, catered for the individual and the community, and offered spiritual sustenance and support in dealing with the traumas and uncertainties of everyday life. Neither agenda offers much direct encouragement to understand how late medieval catholics could adapt to protestant surroundings, and yet it is implausible that all protestants and ‘parish anglicans’ were fearfully obedient conformists prepared to jettison all their previous beliefs.

One of the most noticeable developments in later medieval lay devotional culture was the assimilation of a Christocentric piety that had originated in the world of mystics and the cloistered. Translated into a parish context, it focussed on the passion of Christ, on the cult of his wounds, on the pietà, and on the mercy manifested towards mankind by the crucified Christ at the Last Judgement. Like all devotional developments, this was a strand within later medieval catholicism which was received more enthusiastically by some communities, and some individuals, than it was by others. Nevertheless, the general trend in the fifteenth century of positioning the Doom over


the chancel arch, and of emphasising Christ’s wounds and the instruments of the passion, suggests that an important aspect of this devotional trend had permeated the understanding of the economy of salvation in most parishes. Such developments had repercussions for the cult of the saints, and of the Virgin Mary in particular, tending to reduce their intercessory role whilst at the same time making them potentially more approachable as human saintly figures.

It is a key argument of this book that this evolving Christocentric devotion offered a bridge to Reformation in terms of religious understanding. Of course, not all its adherents made this transition. Most obviously, the badge of the Five Wounds of Christ was adopted by the defenders of catholicism in the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536. However, the difficulty faced by historians in determining whether a will preamble expressing the testator’s trust to be saved by the merits of Christ’s passion and precious blood-shedding should be classified as catholic or protestant illustrates the way in which later medieval Christocentric devotion could facilitate the transition to protestantism. This process was most evident in the first phase of evangelical protestantism, but its strength is further suggested by its fate in the more Calvinist climate of the Elizabethan period onwards. As the image of the deity became more distant and less human, the spirituality of the godly needed to take on a more human, Christ-centred character.

All this, it might be thought, has little relation to gender, and in particular to the impact of the Reformation on women. But, even in terms of our initial list of questions, it is evident that this is not the case. The simple assumption that the protestant attack on the cult of the Virgin Mary deprived women of an inspiring role model and patron seems more questionable in the context of increasingly Christocentric parish religion. Shifting patterns of piety offered new possibilities of identification and emulation, and could alter the extent to which gender was fundamental to this process. A devotional focus on the passion of the adult Christ rather than his infancy had the potential to transform Marian devotion, and if Mary was no longer quintessentially a divine nursing mother, we need to ask how this affected her role as a model primarily for women.

Thanks to the centrality of Christ in the medieval mystical tradition, historians have explored the gender implications of Christocentric piety more extensively than those of Marian devotion. However, we need to be wary about translating these conclusions from the world of the mystic and the cloistered to that of the parishioner. Although the Christocentric emphasis of late medieval devotion came from the former source, it intersected with the devotional needs of parish religion in which mystical ecstasy, and ideas of the individual as the bride of Christ, were less important than the pastorally inspired concerns of moral teaching. In a parish context, gendered notions
of the importance of Christian renunciation and divine fusion, which are so central to understanding mystical experience, seem much less obviously relevant. When affective devotion crossed into the parishes it operated in a world with different parameters. For both Marian and Christ-centred devotion, as also for the related cult of the saints, our assumptions concerning the relationship between religion and gender need to be reconsidered. Only then will it be possible to draw conclusions about Reformation impact in terms of gender.

Patterns of piety are crucial to this project in two senses. Neither medieval catholicism nor Reformation protestantism offered a single mode of devotion which was followed by all, whether men or women, clerical or lay. Both were fluid and shifting in their emphases, as they adapted to official stimuli – whether papal encouragement of indulgenced devotions, or changes in official policy that led the Reformation from a Lutheran to a more Calvinist path – and were shaped by the needs and understanding of parishioners. But for an analysis in terms of gender it is important to explore how such patterns of piety intersected with another kind of pious model: the godly exemplar, whether a devout lay person or a canonised saint.

It was a commonplace of early modern thought that women were ‘to piety more prone’. Although by their nature such assumptions are hard to prove, they crystallised in the notion of the godly woman, a concept that powerfully shaped contemporary understanding of religion and gender. Moreover, catholicism and protestantism offered significantly different models of the godly woman. Pre-Reformation catholicism identified the mistress of the household as its ritual specialist, whilst in protestantism the godly woman became an emblem of piety, faith and devotion, and a vital counterpart to the potentially sterile understanding of the rational male who could interpret scripture but might lack a living faith.

This redefinition permeated Reformation culture, whether in depictions of the godly woman seated attentively at the preacher’s feet, or in the more enthusiastic publication of funeral sermons eulogising the piety of godly women than of those praising godly men. The title page of the 1611 edition of Richard Hooker’s Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie summarised this position and raises further questions (Fig.1). Three aspects of the Church were depicted as being illumined by God: the king wielding the authority of the christian magistrate, a cathedral representing the visible Church, and a devout woman as the emblem of the piety of the faithful. Upon closer inspection, the devout woman can be identified as Mary Magdalen. As a substitute for the Virgin Mary as the emblem of the Church, Mary Magdalen seems a problematic model for women. Far from an ideal woman set upon a pedestal, the unchaste Magdalen could be a difficult exemplar in a society in which female honour was defined mainly in sexual terms. Yet, the Magdalen
also offered a powerful image of the redemption of the sinner through faith which, in the context of the protestant emphasis on the abject sinfulness of mankind, could make the nuances of gender appear trivial.

The figure of Mary Magdalen also reminds us of a fundamental, but never clearly acknowledged, tension within Reformation protestantism. Despite her scriptural credentials and her inclusion amongst the purged list of saints in the Prayer Book of 1549, this was her last official appearance. In the process that Roston has aptly labelled the ‘descent down the ladder of sanctity’, protestantism turned away from the ranks of the saints to heroes and heroines drawn from the Old Testament and Apocrypha. Mary Magdalen was an anomaly in this company, but part of the same trend that aimed, at least in part, to avoid the danger of idolatry. Yet it was this process that gave the Reformation its split personality. Such exemplars, despite their consecration into the service of orthodox protestantism, were excluded from the parish church, where the painted scriptural texts and the orderly disposition of the congregation exuded order and uncompromising prescription. In contrast, the accounts and depictions of the most favoured Old Testament and Apocryphal exemplars offered a continuous testing and exploration of the ambiguities of gender and moral responsibility. In accounts of the Fall and the stories of Susanna and Bathsheba, Adam, the elders and godly King David could find their actions subjected to uncomfortable scrutiny.

Despite the prominence of gendered models, and the ability of historians to extract apparently misogynistic quotations from puritan advice literature, the impact of the protestant Reformation on conceptions of gender was therefore a much more complex process. It was, moreover, a process in which little new was invented, but many themes in later medieval catholicism were given greater prominence. For those negotiating the transition, in religious as well as gender terms, it was not a completely uncharted journey, and, from the surviving fragments of the travelogue, it is that journey that this book aims to map.
PART 1
Religious roles

In the poem ‘How the good wiff taughte hir daughtir’, which survives in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century versions, the mother instructs her daughter that it is a wife’s duty to go to church, to worship God on holy days and to bid her beads, and suggests that piety is an essential attribute for a young woman wishing to secure a good husband. In contrast, the equivalent male poem, ‘How the wise man taught his sonne’, contains only a passing reference to the son’s religious obligations. Attendance at church is not even mentioned, although the young man is reminded to pray each morning to God that he may not sin. He is also warned not to think too much of amassing worldly goods since wealth is an obstacle to entering Paradise. However, this religious point is linked to the, perhaps more telling, secular one that worldly property is of little use when you die and your wife transfers it on marriage to someone who is not of your kin. These injunctions clearly do not represent a very considerable investment of time or importance on the part of the married man in religious matters. Instead, the implicit message of the two poems seems to be that the pious activities of the wife, and of the female sex in general, are almost sufficient not only for their own religious well being but also for that of the whole household.1

Roles outlined in prescriptive literature may not, of course, tell the whole story. Not only may they be directed towards a particular section of society – in this case the mistress of an urban household seeking to guide the conduct

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1 Editions of different versions of the poems are as follows: F. J. Furnivall (ed.), Early English Poems and Treatises on Manners and Meals in Olden Time, EETS orig. ser. 32 (London, 1868), pp. 36–52 (from Lambeth and Trinity mss); F. J. Furnivall (ed.), Queene Elizabethes Achademy, A Booke of Precedence etc., EETS extra ser. 8 (London, 1869), pp. 44–51 (from Ashmole 61); T. Mustanoja (ed.), The Good Wife Taught her Daughter, The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage, The Thewis of Gud Women, Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae b 61/2 (Helsinki, 1948) (from the Emmanual and Huntington mss). P. Riddy, ‘Mother knows best: reading social change in a courtesy text’, Speculum 71 (1996), 66–86, points out that there is a much stronger tradition of courtesy literature addressed to sons than to daughters. These two poems were not generally paired in collections despite following the same form.