CHAPTER I

Reading and puritanism in the long seventeenth century

INTRODUCTION

This book is about the intersection of the culture of puritanism and the history of reading in the long seventeenth century. It seeks to advance our understanding of puritanism by examining the place of reading within this religious culture and argues that by intertwining these two strands of study – reading and religious culture – we emerge with a deeper understanding of both and of their place within early modern English society.

Writing his *Book of Martyrs* – a book which would become one of the key works of puritan culture – in the middle of the sixteenth century, John Foxe looked back on printing as an invention inspired not so much by Gutenberg as by God. The year 1450, he wrote, had been 'famous and memorable, for the divine and miraculous invention of printing'. 'God himselfe was the ordayner and disposer' of this invention and it was no coincidence that it was revealed just as the Church was trying to persecute as heretics those who struggled to reveal God's truth. Against the worldly power of the Roman Antichrist, God sought 'with Printing, writing, and reading to convince darkenes by light, errour by truth, ignorance by learning'. By the time Foxe wrote, the invention had wrought such a religious transformation – its effects were such that 'knowledge groweth, judgement increaseth, books are dispersed, the Scripture is seene, the Doctours be read, stories be opened, times compared, truth decerned, falshod detected'. Western culture was at a juncture at which 'eyther the pope must abolish printing, or he must seek a new world to raygne over: for els, as this world standeth, printing doubtles will abolish hym'. Foxe described a technology which was intrinsically democratic: 'through the light of printing, the worlde beginneth nowe to have eyes to see, and heades to judge'. The pitch of his invective became higher as he described how

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By this printing, as by the gift of tongues, and as by the singular organe of the holy Ghost, the doctrine of the Gospell soundeth to all nations and countryes under heaven: and what God revealeth to one man, is dispersed to many and what is knowne in one nation, is opened to all.

Printing was intrinsically connected with Protestantism and the activities which it furthered worked against the power of the papacy. 'Now nothing doth debilitate and shake the high spire of his Papacie', wrote Foxe, 'so much as reading, preaching, knowledge & judgement, that is to say, the fruit of printing'. In this providential world view, in which technology facilitated the rediscovery of religious truth, it was as if 'the penne of Luther ... hath set the triple crown so awry on the popes head, that it is like never to be set streight agayne'.[1]

Foxe's description evokes a familiar image not only of the allegedly inevitable link between the development of the printing press and the growth of Protestantism – a connection between two religious and technological revolutions – but also of some of the imperatives of reformed religious practice. Bible-reading was a vital component of the practice of Protestantism, a means by which to channel the Holy Spirit into the soul of the reader. Reformation theology and iconography frequently described and depicted faith as if it came through the printed book, as if God spoke to the believer directly through the pages of the Bible. The association was particularly strong for puritans because the believer was denied recourse to the wider material and sacramental repertoire open to Catholics and, to a lesser extent, mainstream Protestants. Puritans were everywhere depicted with their books open before them, or clutched in their hands: pious reading was represented as their favourite religious activity. Indeed, the echoes of Foxe's description can be heard reverberating through the words of the historians who have followed in his footsteps, connecting printing and Protestantism at the hip and figuring

[1] *Actes and Monuments* (1583), pp. 707–8. It is rarely observed that the reformers also argued that the Devil as well as the pope acted against the press. Cotton Mather, the great historian of early American puritanism, for example, argued that the Devil hindered the invention of printing and spectacles, by which scripture could be spread and seen: and that the Devil would 'with all his heart make one huge Bonefire of all the Bibles in the world'. See Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World: Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches Lately Executed in New-England* (repr. of 1693 edn, London, 1862), pp. 52, 182. The subject of attitudes towards printing will be greatly advanced by Elizabeth Eisenstein's forthcoming *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending*. For the importance of Foxe to studies of the history of the book, see especially John N. King, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Print Culture* (Cambridge, 2006); and Elizabeth Evenden and Thomas S. Freeman, *Religion and the Book in Early Modern England: The Making of John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

private religious reading as perhaps the defining characteristic of reformed individual religious belief.[2]

The realities of religious practice and of religious belief frequently strayed some distance from these idealized models. Such was the diversity of Protestant uses of the Bible that in 1695 an obscure Devon rector called John Rost drew the remarkable comparison between Muslim respect for the sacred book and Christian defilement of its once sacred pages. Rost recalled an ambassador's observation of the Turks that

when they were at their Solemn devotions, and he observed that when in reading the Alcaron, (which is their Bible) or of their Prayers, the Priest pronounced the name of *Mahomet* they all bowed themselves very low, but when he pronounced the name of God they fell flat upon their Faces to the Ground. And he says that they are exceedingly careful to preserve Paper from any filth or Defilement, and that if they chance to see any lie scattered on the ground, they presently take it up, wipe it, and put it into some safe place; and the reason they give for it is this that for ought they know, the name of God hath been, or is written upon it. And if any one doth tread, or sit upon the Alcaron, they esteem it an unpardonable Crime: Because they look upon it as a contempt cast upon that Book, in which the name of God is so often written.[3]

Instead of having such reverence for the sacred space of the page, Protestants *used* their books, dog-earing pages, underlining passages and writing in their margins. The uses of Bibles – let alone other books – were nothing if not varied and they show us how the book carried an importance not only as a sacred text (however much it was scribbled upon) but also as an object which had a particular cultural resonance. In particular, Bibles assumed great significance for the godly – a term I use interchangeably with puritan – whether they were presented as gifts, lent to fellow believers, passed through families, or held aloft as symbols of the faith.[4] When a widow of an old acquaintance came to beg the charity of the

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[2] This theme of the reformers has been triumphant in scores of influential historical studies, including A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1966); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1979); Mark U. Edwards Jr, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley, CA, 1994); and David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, CT, 2003). The association has been effectively challenged by, among others, Richard Gawthrop and Gerald Strauss, 'Protestantism and Literacy in Early Modern Germany', *Past and Present*, 104 (1984), pp. 31–55; and Alexandra Walsham, '"Domme Preachers"?: Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print', *Past and Present* 168 (2000), pp. 72–123.

[3] John Rost, *The Swearer's Doom; Or, A Discourse Setting Forth the Great Sinfulness and Danger of Rash and Vain Swearing* (London, 1695), pp. 20–1.

[4] For definitions of puritanism, see pp. 10–16 below.

puritan intelligencer Roger Morrice in 1685, too poor to feed and clothe
her children or herself, Morrice gave her five pounds, and she held up her
Bible, entreating him to be 'obedient to the contents of this booke'.[5] In
such moments, the Bible was simultaneously a holy object and a sacred
text, as it had been in the Civil War when parliamentarians marched
under banners in which books testified to the religious significance of
their political allegiance. Their banners bore images of the Bible, rousing
mottoes like 'For Reformation', 'Antichrist must downe' and 'Pray and
fight', together with stirring quotations from the Psalms.[6] Following the
same logic, albeit more precariously, in a religious dispute in New
England in the 1630s – in which the opponents styled themselves 'Scots'
and 'English' – the 'Scots' marched with a Geneva Bible strapped to a pole
to signify their religious allegiance.[7] The troubled years of the mid-
seventeenth century offer many similar examples which testify to the
importance to puritans of Bibles both as objects and as religious texts,
as well as many hostile descriptions which claimed they were religious
vandals who treated the holy book with disrespect. A particularly imagina-
tive graphic example of this (see Figure 1) can be seen in a woodcut
illustrating the title page of the Royalist water-poet John Taylor's *Religions
Enemies* (1641), in which an Anabaptist, a Brownist, a Familist, and a
Papist held the corner of a blanket and used it to toss the truth of religion
– which was represented by a large Bible – around in the air.

Furthermore, the Bible had a range of more official physical uses,
which offer us further evidence of the key role it played in social relations.
These included some uses which remain familiar today, like swearing an
oath on the Bible in court, as well as others which are rather more
unfamiliar, such as the ceremony for degrading a clergyman from the
priesthood, which began with the cleric being handed a Bible which was
then taken away from him, before his cap, girdle and gown were formally
removed by the authorities.[8] Even more alien to us was the widespread use

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[5] Mark Goldie et al. (eds.), *The Entring Book of Roger Morrice 1677–1691* (6 vols., Woodbridge, 2007),
vol. III, p. 47.

[6] See Ian Gentles, 'The Iconography of Revolution: England 1642–1649', in Ian Gentles, John Morrill
and Blair Worden (eds.), *Soldiers, Writers, and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge,
1998), pp. 98, 103.

[7] See David Cressy, 'Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England', *Journal
of Library History*, 21 (1986), pp. 94–6. The account is related in Thomas Lechford, *New-Englands
Advice to Old-England* ([London], 1644).

[8] If we are to judge from Roger Morrice's account of the degrading of the pamphleteer and Whig
clergyman Samuel Johnson in November 1686, which was part of his punishment for inciting the
army to mutiny in his *An Humble and Hearty Address to all the English Protestants in the Present Army*
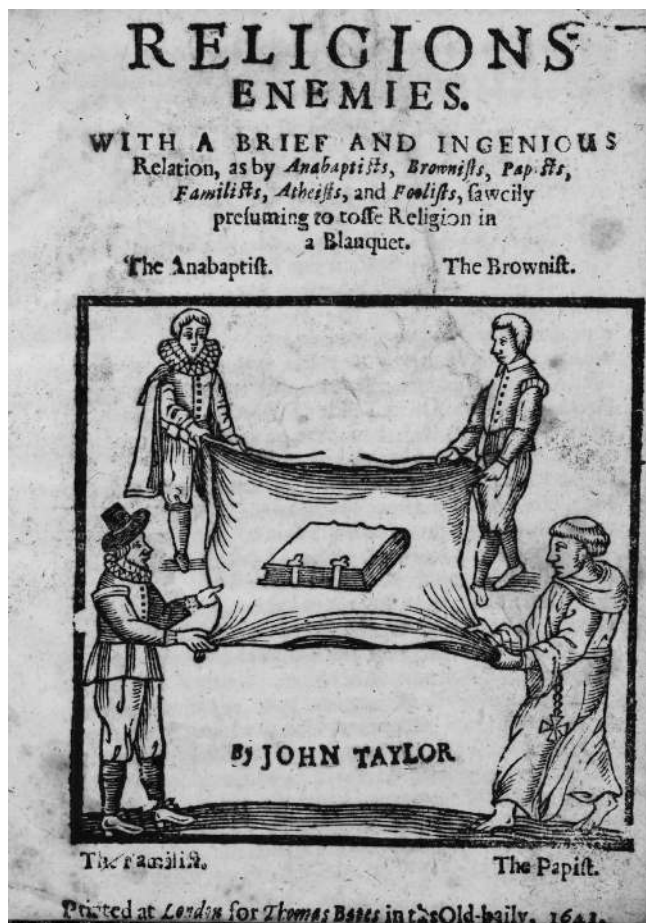(1686). See Goldie et al., *The Entring Book of Roger Morrice*, vol. III, p. 304.

Figure 1. John Taylor, *Religions Enemies With A Brief And Ingenious Relation, as by Anabaptists, Brownists, Papists, Familists, Atheists, and Foolists, sawcily presuming to tosse Religion in a Blanquet* (London, 1641), title page. By permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

of the Bible as an object with quasi-magical properties, to protect homes from demons and to expel them when they afflicted families: practices which retained their power in the reformed world.[9]

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[9] For which see Andrew Cambers, 'Demonic Possession, Literacy and "Superstition" in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 202 (2009), pp. 3–35.

Such uses of books – which remind us that many Protestants frequently drew upon methods of religiosity more reminiscent of those practised by Catholics – together with more straightforward modes of reading provide the material upon which this book is based. They offer evidence of how people encountered, read and used books in the past. The range of uses suggested above is important, for this is not just a book about what kind of books were read by puritans as part of their religious practice – although that subject will be covered – but rather it is an examination of the place of reading in puritan culture, of how the godly read and used books, and of how and why reading mattered so much in their lives. As such, my analysis seeks to cast light upon the religious and cultural history of early modern England more generally.

THE ARGUMENT

It is no surprise that books were central to godly culture. The image of the puritan was intrinsically linked to that of the book, so much so that literacy was often presented as a key skill in the religious repertoire of those who hoped that God had set them on the path to salvation. Some godly readers rejoiced as if picking up their Bibles established a hotline to God. To adapt the phrase of David Hall, they appear to have believed that the very presence of the Bible was akin to having God next to the reader.[10] But for others the presence of a text with which they could not engage merely confirmed their reprobation. This stark realization was perhaps particularly clear to those who came from outside Christian culture and were disappointed that the Word of God did not speak to them through their Bibles. As the curious and heartfelt comment inscribed in the margin of a Bible owned by a Christian Indian in Martha's Vineyard in New England read, 'I am forever a pitiful person in the world. I am not able clearly to read this, this book.'[11] But in seeking to reconstruct godly

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[10] David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York, 1989), p. 26.

[11] Cited in Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York, 1998), p. 31. Others expressed similar bewilderment. In his autobiography of 1789, Olaudah Equiano wrote, 'I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.' Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (Penguin Classics revised edn, London, 2003), p. 68. The notes detail a series of similar examples, pp. 254–5.

devotional reading and place it in a series of contexts – domestic, urban, political and so on – this book probes deeper beneath the surface of reading practices, observing and analysing the ways in which puritans read and used their books and using this reconstruction to refine our understanding of both the nature of puritanism and the practice and representation of reading in the seventeenth century.

Treating reading capaciously and employing a broad definition of the book (including manuscripts and ephemeral matter alongside printed books), I argue that reading was vital to the practice of puritanism. Reading was a crucial strand of puritan self-identity. As a social practice, it both bound the godly together and helped to set them apart from their non-godly neighbours. It offered a practical way of channelling the Holy Spirit as well as an accessible means of testing one's salvation: it was one of the methods by which the godly examined themselves for signs of election. At the same time, unravelling the ways in which the godly read draws attention to the areas of convergence between godly, mainstream Protestant and traditional modes and styles of piety. Of particular importance here is communal reading. In contrast to much of the historiography, I argue the case for the special importance of collective, social and public reading to the godly, demonstrating how far reading aloud and in company was a vital strand in the fabric of puritan piety. The godly read in this way not because they (or the majority of them) did not have the ability to read silently or privately – although it must be admitted that the collectivity of this reading made the practice of their religiosity more accessible (at least in theory) to those without fully articulated reading skills – but because the sociability of reading in this way was interwoven with other aspects of the style of puritan religiosity, such as their word-centred piety, which oscillated between extempore prayer and set text; their willingness to encapsulate the doctrine of predestination by self-consciously using their social practices to set themselves apart from their non-godly neighbours; and their stress on voluntarism as a means of expressing their devotion.[12] Such reading, although hardly exclusive to

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[12] For these characteristics as those salient to the definition of puritanism, see Peter Lake, 'Defining Puritanism – Again?', in Francis J. Bremer (ed.), *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith* (Boston, MA, 1993), pp. 3–29. Although the prevalence of social and oral reading in the practice of puritanism might be latched upon by those wanting to argue (in a revisionist vein) that puritanism was diluted in practice and thus 'unpopular', or (in a different vein) that such modes of piety made puritanism more accessible and thus 'popular' than is usually thought, both urges should be resisted. The point is that the godly self-consciously adopted a mode of social reading as part of their practice of puritanism.

puritans and not the *only* kind of reading they did – the godly were both oral and silent readers – intersected with, and was intimately related to, other crucial components of godly religiosity, such as listening to sermons, writing and praying.[13] It was at the heart of modes of evangelical piety from the early days of the Reformation in the sixteenth century to the stirrings of evangelicalism in the early eighteenth century. This reading was not only a practical way of spreading the word, but also, as it had been since the days of the Lollards – who probably got their name because of the sound made by their reading of the scriptures in the vernacular – an outward sign of religious allegiance and identity.[14]

In what follows I trace these styles of piety across the seventeenth century, establishing connections between the religiosity of early Stuart puritans and post-Restoration nonconformists which are rarely examined in any depth by historians. In part, I argue that the disjuncture between these separate historiographies has been a consequence of an artificial periodization which has parcelled the seventeenth century into three self-contained and sealed packages: before the Civil War; the era of Civil War, Commonwealth and Protectorate; and the era of the Restoration and the later seventeenth century. Despite all the upheavals of the century and the importance of these key moments of history, it makes sense to study the history of religious practice over the whole century, to think about continuity and change over the long seventeenth century. This approach recognizes that religious practices did not necessarily change quickly and neither did the books people read. It highlights the import-ance of studying old books, of thinking about their reception long after their first publication, as they were digested by their readers, sold and resold, as they passed through families and religious communities, and as they found new audiences in changed circumstances. Thinking of the century as a relatively coherent period in English religious history allows the long-term influence of key works – including Foxe's *Actes and Monu-ments* and Samuel Clarke's numerous collections, in which the lives of the godly were pickled and preserved, both reflecting and shaping puritan identities – to be drawn out. The reverberations of godly books across the century are vital to understanding the nature of religious identity.

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[13] For the interplay of orality and literacy in the period more generally, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000).

[14] For these continuities, see Andrew Cambers and Michelle Wolfe, 'Reading, Family Religion, and Evangelical Identity in Late Stuart England', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 875–96.

We need only turn to the most famous examples of life-writing to see the need to trace such developments. In the spiritual autobiographies and diaries that characterize much of the culture of puritanism in the seventeenth century, we see the echoes of key works, whether they were written by the humblest, long-forgotten puritans or by the most famous worthies of the age. In his printed autobiography, *Grace Abounding* (1666), John Bunyan recalled that his wife had inherited from her father few worldly goods saving two invaluable tokens of early Stuart piety: Arthur Dent's *The plaine mans path-way to heaven* (1601) and Lewis Bayly's *The Practise of Pietie* (1612). In the context of his own experiences in the Civil War, it was the reading of these works of early Stuart puritanism that helped to bring about the spiritual transformation of the man who became the most famous late Stuart dissenter.[15]

In interweaving the histories of the book and reading with those of religious belief and practice, the book makes three essential claims. First, that godly reading was a style of religious engagement with texts which was frequently oral and communal: to read among fellow believers was a key sign of evangelical religious identity. Second, such reading lends itself to a model of early modern religion in which 'belief' was primarily socially constructed and maintained, thus casting doubt on the common assumption that the Reformation ushered in an era of individualization and interiorization. Third, that focusing on the practice of reading draws attention to the complexity of godly culture, simultaneously showing how reading was a social practice which provided cohesion within the godly community and revealing how it operated as a kind of 'ritual of separation' which helped to set the godly apart from their neighbours, despite the fact that the practices of reading themselves highlighted many of the areas of convergence and overlap between godly, mainstream Protestant and 'traditional' religious cultures.[16] As such, the book also offers a way of engaging with the continued debates on the success of the 'long Reformation' from a novel and challenging perspective since it provides an assessment of how far the devotional reading practices of the godly, whom we might expect to have reacted most positively to the reformed message, lived up to the ideals

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[15] John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding: with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski with Anita Pacheco (Oxford, 1998), p. 9.

[16] For 'rituals of separation', see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), Chapter 1; and the brilliant exposition in John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850* (London, 1975), pp. 108–48, esp. pp. 108–9.

prescribed by reformed writers.[17] Historiographically, the book draws
on the insights of the work of scholars of post-Reformation religion such
as Peter Lake, Margo Todd and Alex Walsham and seeks to intertwine
them with work on reading, print and literacy by Adam Fox, Roger
Chartier and Adrian Johns. Its impact upon these fields is explored
further below.

DEFINING PURITANISM AND GODLY CULTURE

In exploring the nature of the reading, the book also advances our
understanding of the nature of puritanism. Whatever the sympathies
and prejudices of its authors, who have themselves spanned a full
spectrum of religious positions (from Laudian polemicists to noncon-
formists and secularists) as well as political standpoints (Marxist, Whig
and Conservative), the history of puritanism has traditionally been
written with particular emphasis placed upon doctrine – especially
upon the single issue of predestination – and the religious programme
which they advocated has been located in the context of its relation to
politics. In part, of course, such an emphasis is very proper. Historians
have to define puritanism and since it is deeply problematic to follow
those hostile contemporaries for whom 'puritan' was a catch-all term of
abuse, they have focused on the tangible. Principally, this has meant
figuring puritans as those who thought that the Reformation of the
sixteenth century had not gone far enough and who thus advocated
further reform of church and state, based not on what they saw as the
compromised halfway house of Lutheran theology but upon the further
and more clearly articulated theology of Calvin and Beza, in which the
doctrine of predestination was paramount. Although the wider impact
of puritanism is frequently noted, its definition in doctrinal terms has
tended to result in political histories which have charted the godly
proposals for further reform and assessed their success both in the
Elizabethan period and in the run-up to the Civil Wars of the mid-
seventeenth century.

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[17] On the long Reformation, see Nicholas Tyacke (ed.), *England's Long Reformation 1500–1800*
(London, 1998). A parallel story might also be told of the history of Catholic devotional reading,
one which places renewed emphasis on the comparisons between post-Reformation Catholicism
and nonconformity. Although some such comparisons are drawn in what follows, they are meant as
preliminary and speculative and more research might be done in this area. For a rich and suggestive
essay towards such a study, see Walsham, '"Domme Preachers"?'.