Introduction

THE WOMAN ON THE ROCK

In 1537 the vicar of Yoxford in Suffolk, a man named Thomas Wylley, wrote to Henry VIII's chief minister Thomas Cromwell. The ostensible purpose of the letter was to complain about his parishioners and neighbours, who had responded with open hostility to the reformist Gospel which he was preaching. Despite that Gospel's official backing, Wylley protested, 'the most part of the prystes of Suffolk wyll not reseyve me yn to ther Chyrchys to preche'. Instead, he was reputed to be 'a gret lyar'. And so he appealed for Cromwell to support him against these local obscurantists: 'The Lorde make you the Instrument of my helpe Lorde Cromewell, that I may have the lyberty to preche the trewthe.'

The bulk of the letter, however, was given over to demonstrating exactly how Wylley had been preaching the truth. He was an aspiring playwright, and had been using the stage as a propaganda tool. At least one of his plays had already been performed. He enclosed the text of a second, 'a Reverent Recyvyng of the sacrament', with his letter, emphasising that he had dedicated it to Cromwell. Clearly, his hope was less for the liberty to preach in and around Yoxford than for the liberty to leave Suffolk altogether and enter Cromwell's service. His feelings for his flock can perhaps be guessed from the title of one of his plays: 'a Rude Commynawlte'.[1]

We know nothing more about the ambitious vicar of Yoxford. His story could be retold almost endlessly from the state papers of the late 1530s, and scholars of the English Reformation since the mid-1970s have done just that. This is a story of evangelical reformers, the forerunners of English Protestantism, struggling to make themselves heard in a country where loyalty to traditional religion ran deep, and where the new Gospel which they preached met with widespread hostility – not least because of its very novelty. It is a story of a new religion being forced on an unwilling people by the power of

[1] PRO SP 1/116 fo. 158[r] (*LP* XII (i) 529).

the Tudor state; a story whose moral, in J. J. Scarisbrick's words, is that 'on the whole, English men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came'.[2]

However, this is not the only story which Thomas Wylley's letter tells. He informed Cromwell that he was composing yet another play, 'caulyd, The Woman on the Rokke, yn the fyer of faythe affynyng, & a purgyng yn the trewe purgatory'. No text survives for this, or any of Wylley's plays, but we may guess at its theme. The woman on the rock presumably represents the true Church, the bride of Christ. Wylley seems to be drawing on the symbolism of the Book of Revelation, in which the woman with child who symbolises either the Virgin Mary or the Church is persecuted by the devil, and carried away to safety. In Wylley's version, however, the woman is not in the wilderness, but on the Rock, that is, grounded in Christ himself. Despite her travails, she has a firm footing. More interestingly, the persecution she faces is described as the fire of faith, refining and purging her. Rather than being troubled by the devil, she is burning in a refiner's fire, a biblical symbol for God. This fire is both caused by her faith and a means of purifying that faith.[3] This play seems to have been telling a story far older than that told by the 'revisionist' historians of the Reformation. Here we have, apparently, the classic Protestant tale of the true Church under persecution. It is a precursor of the story told so vividly a generation later, in John Foxe's huge and hugely influential history of the English Church and its martyrs, the *Actes and Monuments*.

The central assumption of this Protestant view of the Reformation was that the religious conflicts in sixteenth-century Europe were a reflection of the eternal, cosmic confrontation between Christ and Antichrist. Foxe maintained that the division between papist and Protestant was no chance alignment, the result of the contingencies of religious politics. It was a worldly reflection of a spiritual chasm.

> There is no neutrality, nor mediation of peace, nor exhortation to agrement that will serue betwene these two contrary doctrines, but either the Popes errors must geue place to Gods word, or els the veritye of God must geue place vnto them.[4]

On this view the religious divide was both eternal and unbridgeable. And this basic dualism was affirmed across Europe by polemicists on both sides. Catholics merely reversed the colours. The eventual formalisation of the divide and the creation of entrenched religious identities defined over against one another lent apparent support to Foxe's view. Until recently, it was common practice for historians tacitly to affirm this interpretation by using the

[2] J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984), 1.
[3] Psalm 40:2; Malachi 3:2; Matthew 7:24–27; Hebrews 12:29; I Peter 1:7; Revelation 12.
[4] *AM*, 1234.

terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' as party labels from the very beginning of the Reformation controversies. The terminological problems arising from the realisation that this is untenable have not yet been resolved satisfactorily.[5] This book, however, argues that Foxe was wrong. The religious divide which Foxe celebrated, and which he did so much to perpetuate, need not have taken the shape which it eventually did. There was both mediation of peace and exhortation to agreement, nor did the two doctrines always appear so contrary. In the early years of the Reformation, religious reform had many faces, and not all of them fit into the later portraits of the Reformation as it should have been.

Foxe's depiction of an unbridgeable religious divide has proved to be remarkably enduring. Partisan Catholic and Protestant historians have long shared an interest in maintaining it, and some recent scholarship emphasising the vitality of traditional religion has also reinforced it. However, the new interest in traditional religion has also allowed the wide variations in English religious belief and practice in the first two generations of the Reformation to come to light. Some other recent work has argued that the opposing religious parties were less sharply separated from one another and from mass culture than they would have liked to believe.[6] This book examines an old subject – early English Protestantism – in the light of our new-found awareness of the many-headed nature of religious culture in this period. It traces the more important strands of reformist thought and behaviour, and connects them to their broader political and social context. It follows their development over one critical period of the English Reformation, the last years of Henry VIII's life; from the closing period of Cromwell's Reformation in 1538–40, marked by a perceived official rejection of further religious change, to the death of the old king in January 1547, which – as things turned out – opened the way for an aggressively Protestant regime under his young son Edward VI. And it argues that the fate of evangelicalism during those years was dominated by the tension between the reformers' two loyalties, to their king and to their faith.

In this early period of the Reformation, evangelicals hoped that that tension could be resolved. The divisions of which Foxe later wrote were far from watertight. Thomas Wylley's play might serve as a symbol of this ambiguity. The woman on the rock may be a symbol of Protestantism under persecution, but the description of her suffering is lifted from traditional Catholic theology. She is 'a purgyng yn the trewe purgatory'. We may be sure that the play was polemical, but its polemic borrowed from the vocabulary of

[5] See above, pp. xv–xvi.
[6] See, for example, Christopher Marsh, *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England* (Basingstoke, Hants., 1998); Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

its opponents. There was no room for the traditional doctrine of purgatory in the kind of evangelicalism which Wylley preached. Purgatory was not mentioned in Scripture. Evangelicals roundly rejected the idea that penitential suffering after death could be part of the scheme of salvation, arguing that this made Christ's sacrifice meaningless. Wylley's reference to the 'trewe' purgatory makes it clear that he shared these reservations. His 'purgatory' appears to be a metaphor for suffering for the sake of Christ in this world. However, by using the idea of purgatory rather than simply denouncing it, he ventured onto his opponents' doctrinal ground. Most religious polemic of the Reformation era was a dialogue of the deaf, with polemicists more concerned to shore up the faith of the converted than to persuade their opponents. In this case, however, both the medium of drama and the use of an opponent's vocabulary suggest a genuine attempt to reach out to the unconverted. Wylley's unmistakably evangelical ideas are deliberately framed so as to be accessible to a traditionalist audience. Moreover, this is more than a canny technique of proselytisation. His use of purgatory as an image unavoidably implies that traditional religion might have something to contribute towards the right understanding of the faith. There was a true purgatory even if purgatory as his audience understood it was false.

The years after Cromwell's fall in 1540 were troubled times for reformers. The fire of faith claimed its victims, and others, like the woman in Revelation, were carried to the cruel safety of exile. But most of them remained 'affynyng, & a purgyng yn the trewe purgatory'. Many were like Thomas Wylley, whose opposition to traditional religion was not so absolute that he would not borrow ideas from it. They were ready to dress their reformism in conservative clothes. For some, this was grounded in a genuine wish to convert their opponents, rather than merely to exchange polemical shellfire. For others, it was because religious identities were as yet unformed. We find many reformers expressing exotic opinions and doing so in idiosyncratic terms. Others still hoped to use their evangelical insights, not to separate the true Church from the false, but to reforge England's disintegrating religious unity. Most importantly, like the Suffolk playwright, almost all English evangelicals had their hopes centred on the regime, and in particular on the person of Henry VIII. Their reluctance to disobey their lawful sovereign and their fear of persecution combined with the regime's continued (if ambiguous) sponsorship of limited reform to produce an evangelicalism which was both non-confrontational and remarkably diverse.

The 'trewe purgatory', however, was not a state but a process. Political events, as well as the internal dynamics of the reformist movement itself, ensured that by the time of the old king's death English reformism was no longer as scattered, doctrinally ill-defined and politically open to compromise as it had been. Reformers became increasingly alienated from the state,

not least because of the regular bouts of persecution which they faced. In particular, a political crisis in the spring of 1543 left many previously moderate reformers thoroughly alienated from the regime. If the fictional woman on the rock can be taken as a symbol of English evangelicals at the beginning of this period, at the end the obvious symbol is, appropriately, more tangible: Anne Askew or Ayscough, an outspoken gentlewoman executed for heresy in 1546. Partly because of the vivid account of her interrogations which she wrote, Askew became the most memorable reformist martyr of the 1540s. Despite intense pressure to recant, she maintained her radical doctrines and refused to betray her associates. So, notoriously and in gross violation of the law, she was stretched on the rack so severely that by the time she was burned she could no longer stand. She could not have been more different from Thomas Wylley. By 1546, as a symbol of England's evangelicals, the compromises and ambiguity of the woman on the rock had been overtaken by the demonstrative steadfastness of the woman on the rack.

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Politics and Protestants, Christopher Haigh argued in 1987, are subjects which have had 'at least their due' from scholars of the English Reformation.[7] And it is clearly true that an overemphasis on evangelicalism can distort our view of religious culture in the early sixteenth century. It obscures the mass of the people who left their traditional religion only with great reluctance. More seriously, perhaps, to concentrate on evangelicals is to risk accepting a neat polarisation between Catholic and Protestant, which tends to homogenise the 'multiple manifestations of the new religion' and the equally varied shades of loyalty to the old, while the confused, disconnected and sceptical are written out of the picture altogether.[8] These concerns have driven a good deal of recent scholarship.[9] Given this historiographical context, the appearance of another book which focuses on religious reformers with an emphasis on their political context perhaps requires some explanation.

Part of the justification is familiar. Early evangelicals, like all minorities, remain of intrinsic interest and it is appropriate that they should attract historiographical attention disproportionate to their numbers. As a minority which came to political dominance within a generation and to a kind

[7] Christopher Haigh, 'Introduction', in *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Haigh (Cambridge, 1987), ix.
[8] Caroline Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire 1540–1580* (Cambridge, 1997), 7.
[9] See, for example, Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: popular devotion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1989); Marsh, *Popular Religion*; Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 378–422.

of social dominance within two, they are doubly important. Moreover, to the extent that this minority had its political and religious identity formed at an early stage, its history is of vital importance for understanding the English Protestant identity which was to have such a profound impact on the centuries which followed.

Granted that the early development of English evangelicalism is a subject of lasting importance, the historiographical advances of the past two decades have nevertheless profoundly changed our view of this subject. Those very advances, however, require that our understanding of evangelicalism should be reassessed. Just as an overemphasis on Protestantism can distort our view of other parts of the religious landscape, so the new attention which traditional religion has received has implications for our view of reformist movements. This book aims to explore some of those implications for one critical and neglected period of the early Reformation, namely the last eight or so years of Henry VIII's reign. The period is particularly important in light of the central question posed for Reformation scholarship by 'revisionism' – the so-called 'compliance conundrum'.[10] If most English and Welsh men and women were hostile to religious change, how were the successive Tudor regimes able successfully to impose the dramatic changes which took place in the years after 1534? This question is at its sharpest in the reign of Edward VI, when changes which transformed parish religion more profoundly than anything which Henry VIII had done were forced through by unstable regency regimes in six years, and when serious resistance was limited to one rising in two English counties. In the 1960s A. G. Dickens was clear as to how this was possible: the 'quiet advances of Protestantism during Henry's last years account for the ease with which Somerset established it as the official religion from the beginning of the new reign'.[11] The implication is that during the period after Cromwell's fall the evangelical movement gathered so much support that by 1547 it commanded the allegiance of a critical mass of the English people, if not an actual majority.

More recent scholarship has made this difficult to accept. It is true that by the time of Edward VI's accession, the evangelical minority amongst his subjects was an exceptionally important group. It included a disproportionate number of the wealthy and powerful, it was geographically concentrated in such a way as to magnify its influence, and beyond its hard core of committed adherents stood a much larger number of the interested and the confused. Its numbers were growing rapidly, and its conservative opponents were

[10] The term is Christopher Marsh's: *Popular Religion*, 197. The recent work of Ethan Shagan suggests, usefully, that 'collaboration' may be a more useful concept than mere 'compliance'. Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2002).
[11] A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964), 329.

divided and politically vulnerable. Nevertheless, it remained a small minority.[12] However, if we reject Dickens' portrait of a Reformation driven by a large evangelical mass movement, the problem remains. Where did the Edwardian Reformation come from, and how did it succeed? And although much of the answer must, of course, lie in Edward's reign itself, we are driven, like Dickens, to look back to the last years of Henry's reign. These were the years in which Edwardian Protestantism was forged: the evangelicals' true purgatory. A major purpose of this book is to explore how English evangelicalism changed during this period, both socially and theologically. The results of the exploration will, I hope, shed some light on the later evangelicalism that emerged from these years, and the Reformations which it drove.

A final oddity is that while this book's scope is localised in time, it takes England and Wales in their entirety as its stage. This may seem perverse. After all, the grip which Foxe's interpretation maintained over Reformation historiography has been challenged most effectively in the past forty years by a series of studies which have gone beyond Foxe's material and the State Papers to the local archives of England and Wales. Local studies of this kind enabled Dickens to cast Foxe's account in a new light, and Christopher Haigh to challenge that account head-on. Margaret Bowker's studies of the diocese of Lincoln undermined received truths about the weaknesses of late medieval Catholicism. Other local studies have helped to nuance our account of the Reformation process and to move on from the 'revisionist' agenda.[13] To attempt a national overview, traipsing once again through the crowded field of Tudor high politics, might appear to be pointlessly repetitive. I would suggest, however, that the golden age of the local study in English Reformation history is passing. It is not merely that the map is nearing completion, for some significant gaps remain. Rather, these studies at their best have not simply been attempts to complete a jigsaw puzzle, but have raised questions and introduced methodologies which have had far-reaching implications. Without such fresh approaches, a comprehensive study of the early Reformation in, say, Dorset or Staffordshire is unlikely to reveal significant new trends with which we are not already familiar.

[12] Alec Ryrie, 'Counting sheep, counting shepherds: the problem of numerical allegiance in the English Reformation', in *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*, ed. Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (Cambridge, 2002).

[13] A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509–58* (Oxford, 1959); Christopher Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1975); Ralph Houlbrooke, *Church Courts and People during the English Reformation* (Oxford, 1979); Margaret Bowker, *The Henrician Reformation: The Diocese of Lincoln under John Longland 1521–47* (Cambridge, 1981); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County 1500–1600* (Oxford, 1986); Brigden, *London*; Litzenberger, *English Reformation and the Laity.*

Moreover, despite the huge contribution which they have made, local studies are not necessarily the ideal means of analysing the processes of religious change. In a state as powerfully centralised as Tudor England, the role of the central government cannot be ignored. That government's wishes were of course mediated to the localities through local elites, yet even the indirect impact of such policies could be enormous. The steady flow of rumours about national politics, and the regime's concern to control such rumours, demonstrate that central politics mattered locally.[14] A study of the Reformation which is grounded purely in a local archive is as likely to be unbalanced as one which never ventures beyond the state papers. This is particularly so when dealing with early evangelicals. Patrick Collinson reminds us that such people 'were local in the sense of having had a location, but they were not necessarily localised'.[15] Men and women were converted to reformist views by hearing visiting preachers from outside their region, or, especially in the earliest days, through evangelical books printed on the Continent or in London. They themselves were highly mobile and maintained informal networks of communication across the country. Local studies of evangelicalism stumble over the fact that many evangelicals refused to stay put in one locality. They looked for earthly authority not to the justice of the peace, the local magnate or the bishop, but to the king. They saw themselves in a national (or international) context; and it is in that context that they demand to be studied.

Part I of this book, therefore, examines the national political situation and the evangelical responses to it. Chapter 1 considers the religious politics of the last decade of Henry VIII's reign. It contests the common view of this period as one of conservative reaction, arguing that this interpretation derives largely from a later, partisan historiography. It suggests instead that the regime's religious policies in these years were profoundly ambiguous; sets the limited persecution of these years in context; and examines the undercurrents of continued reform which were just as influential as the eye-catching conservative successes. Chapter 2 examines the ways in which evangelicals dealt with this confused political situation. It surveys the faltering development of evangelical political thought, arguing that the majority of reformers in these years went out of their way to avoid or defuse confrontations with the regime, and continued to exalt royal authority. The test of such theoretical positions came, of course, when the regime chose to enforce the heresy laws or otherwise place individual evangelicals under pressure. I argue that under such circumstances, most reformers were more inclined to dissimulation,

[14] G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), 46–82.
[15] Patrick Collinson, 'England', in *The Reformation in National Context*, ed. Bob Scribner, Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge, 1994), 84.

recantation and pragmatic compromises than to defiance and martyrdom. The last years of Henry's reign have been described as a Counter-Reformation, comparable to that under Mary Tudor in the 1550s.[16] Yet this was a period when both the regime and the reformers were, on the whole, acting so as to lower the temperature of their disagreements.

Part II considers the range of faces which evangelicalism presented under these circumstances. Chapter 3 examines perhaps the most prominent and well-known group of evangelicals from the 1540s: those who fled to exile on the Continent. These exiles included some very prominent evangelical publicists, most of whom held decidedly radical views. I argue, however, that their impact on events and attitudes in England at the time was extremely limited, and that they cannot be taken as representative of the broader evangelical movement. Chapter 4 examines the other public face of reformism: the work of those evangelical preachers and authors who remained in England during this period. It suggests that their work reveals a coherent set of doctrinal and political priorities strikingly different from those of the exiles. As well as being non-confrontational towards the regime, these evangelicals were willing to engage with religious conservatives on their own ground. Their theology was moderate in flavour, owing more to Lutheran ideas than to the radical Swiss and southern German tradition drawn on by many of the exiles. Yet this movement should not be seen simply as toothless. For all their doctrinal moderation, these reformers held forthright views on questions of social morality and the reform of the commonwealth, views which they shared with their more radical brethren and which brought them into conflict with the regime.

Chapter 5 examines the arena in which this conflict became most apparent: education. Education was a central value for reformers, but over the course of this period it became uncomfortably clear that the regime had little interest in supporting schools and the universities, and indeed was more inclined to plunder them. Evangelicals defended the universities as a matter of principle, but also from self-interest. By 1540 an evangelical minority was firmly, and to a degree securely, established at Oxford and especially at Cambridge. The university reformers were no firebrands, but they defended their comparatively moderate doctrines with some determination. During this period they were fighting and winning intellectual battles which were programmatic for a more assertive evangelicalism to come.

University reformism overlapped into the precarious world of evangelicals at court and in royal service, which is examined in chapter 6. Court reformers' proximity to the centres of power gave them an influence and a (sometimes mistaken) sense of security which their lowlier brethren did

[16] Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations* (Oxford, 1993), 14.

not share. Their position also helped to efface the (often substantial) doctrinal differences between them, as personal, political and patronage links cut across such barriers. One particular reformist coterie, the circle of young bloods around the poets Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the earl of Surrey, was characterised by an easy assumption of evangelical language and ideas without much in the way of deep religious commitment. Such fashionable reformism was never going to sweep the world before it, but it did do a great deal to smooth the way for the new learning. However, court circles also reveal another, easily neglected facet of late Henrician evangelicalism: the apparently principled retreat of some who had been partisans of reform in the 1530s into more conformist or even conservative views. The choice between king and Gospel was difficult for reformers in positions of power to evade, and some of them chose the former.

Chapter 7 examines the hidden face of evangelicalism: the world of conventicles and underground groupings of all kinds. Although there is no reason to believe that formal underground congregations existed in this period, the scattered evidence which survives suggests a range of informal evangelical activity from simple gatherings of friends, through evangelical discussion groups to more organised conventicles. The full range of doctrinal and political views can be found amongst these groups, but I argue that they tended towards more confrontational stances, especially when they were dominated by lay people. Such groups also show a limited but clear influence from the old Lollard conventicles on which, in some cases, they were overlaid. Yet the members of these groups were also in contact with more respectable reformers, and the chapter concludes with an analysis of the links of patronage and friendship that tied the reformist movement together, often cutting across doctrinal lines.

Finally, a conclusion returns to politics, considering how the events of the mid-1540s affected this kaleidoscope of reformist opinion. Political shifts interacted with the internal dynamics of evangelicalism, I argue, to undermine the moderate reformism of the printers and preachers and to drive the movement as a whole towards the radicalism of the exiles and those in England who shared their views. As such, on the old king's death, his son's minority government fell into the hands not merely of evangelicals, but of evangelicals with a startlingly radical, Swiss-inspired agenda. By 1547, the struggle for the soul of English evangelicalism had been won decisively by radicals linked to the continental Reformed tradition. It was a victory whose effects were to be felt for centuries; and it was not unopposed.