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Edited by Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger
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CHAPTER I

*Introduction**Claire McEachern*

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

Romans 13:1

The text of Romans 13:1 recurred regularly in early modern political writings. With the advent of the Reformation it provided monarchs with the scriptural authorization for a national church. Fifty years later it served Counter-Reformation and radical Protestant voices alike as a support for critique of that very church. The many lives of this verse demonstrate the political currency and polemical variety of Reformation England's most pervasive syntax – the religious one, or what Patrick Collinson describes below as “the idiom in which it conversed with itself.”

One would have thought that the terms of such a conversation would be equally compelling for those critics who have sought in recent years to repoliticize the texts and contexts of early modern England – “subject” and “power” have certainly been the keywords of new historicism (to name one face of cultural studies), in its attempt to gauge the ways in which political institutions shape literary expression and vice versa. Not only scripture but sermons, liturgy, sacraments, and theological tracts ought to have been rich resources for studying the interactions between state power and subjectivity that have preoccupied literary studies of late. On different grounds, one would have thought that the Puritans' disciplinary ideal, the disappearance of private confession, the massive reordering of both individual and collective devotional practices, the protracted controversies over the “real presence,” the dissemination of an English Bible, the regulation of sexuality in the ecclesiastical courts, and similar matters would have attracted the attention of scholars interested in ideological contestation and the cultural production of inwardness. Yet this has not, largely, been the case.¹

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The aim of this collection is to bring the practices and insights of cultural study of the Renaissance to bear upon the dimension of Renaissance culture which is arguably most pertinent to its concerns. These essays thus investigate the role of religion in shaping political, social, and literary forms, and the reciprocal role of these forms in shaping early modern religion, from the Reformation to the Civil Wars, and Tyndale to Milton – a period in which religion itself was among the most contested of belief structures.

Given that a major contribution of early modern cultural studies has been to reanimate the relations between a literary text and its possible contexts, it is strange indeed that such work has slighted the role of religious institutions and languages. Certainly for a critical practice invested in explaining the ways in which the aesthetic is grounded in material and social determinants, a belief structure that quite brazenly indexes the transcendent may seem a particularly uncongenial locus in which to invest scholarly energy. Yet the failure of historicist inquiry to address the chief terms in which early modern England imagined both the group and the individual has no doubt compromised the adequacy of its historical description. Dissenters from new historicism (for instance) would no doubt claim that such a neglect only corroborates its other lapses: its anecdotal notion of what counts as history; its dependence upon loose analogies; its evasiveness when it comes to causal argument; its tendency to adduce a *Zeitgeist* from an accident; its sullenly Hobbesian assumptions about psychology and politics; its propensity towards schematic binarisms.

It is not as if religion has not been in full view to other forms of scholarship of this period. Certainly “real” historians have long acknowledged the primacy of religion in the political formations of this culture. The immense body of scholarship dealing with the causes of the English Revolution centers on the extent to which these were religious as opposed to “strictly political” (e.g. was the final straw Arminianism or ship money?) and therefore on the ways in which the Reformation shaped and intervened in a national political culture.² Historians have likewise debated the Reformation’s impact on popular religious practices (i.e., was it a “Reformation from above” or below?), a debate recently refueled by the work of Eamon Duffy and Christopher Haigh.³ Social historians like Christina Lerner, Keith Wrightson, and Keith Thomas have explored the ways in which Protestantism destroyed, inflected, or

ignored the traditional religious beliefs and practices of popular culture.⁴

Nor, historically, has religion been absent from the attentions of literary scholars. Critics of Spenser, or Donne, or Herbert, or Milton – to take the most obvious cases – have long explored the religious commitments and longings that inform their works.⁵ (For scholars of Shakespeare, on the other hand, the enigma of his religious identity has served to confirm either his transcendent greatness or his political canniness.) Journals such as *Literature and Theology* and *Renaissance and Reformation* have taken the exchanges between the literary and the sacred as a matter of course and of inquiry, even if such work has tended to isolate both from their political and social matrices. For most historians, both “real” and “old,” the inattention to religion on the part of new historicism might only testify yet once more to its errancy as a critical tool; for more conventional literary scholars, to its obsessions with power at the expense of poetry. Some might even question the motives of a turn to religion: given that new historicism is by now rather long in the tooth (and somewhat stymied by its own methodological paradigms), such a turn rather indicates a vampiric desire for fresh woods and pastures new on which (to mix a metaphor further) its subversion–containment combines might continue to thresh and thrash. Why not let it languish in the incestuous circle of court politics it has circumscribed for itself, the better to observe it go the transient way of all those hegemonies that it has been so fond of bringing to our attention?

Such a prospect notwithstanding, it is the conviction of this volume’s editors that the legacies of new historicism are worth saving – but also worth rephrasing. What makes this collection necessary is what makes it different from more conventional historical and literary scholarship; it is a difference that, one hopes, will reanimate cultural study of the Renaissance itself.

The following essays collectively address three central concerns: (1) how religion configures various communal identities, be they parochial, national, domestic, or doctrinal; (2) the significance of religious discourse for notions of selfhood, affect, and the body; and (3) the cultural negotiations (in Stephen Greenblatt’s term) between sacred and secular domains, e.g. theater and theology; classical and Christian; body and soul.⁶ What distinguishes this collection not only from much new-historicist work, but the work of historians proper, is that its focus is not on the role of religion in political conflicts *per se*,

as if it were a discrete and autonomous factor in cultural process. Rather, we are interested in religion as the entelechy of identity, both corporate and individual – how it animates imagined, staged, mystical, and material bodies. Hence the absence of attention in the following discussions to the now familiar dynamic of “subversion” and “containment,” or the ways in which ideological contradictions function to mask or disable the imperatives of state. These essays focus less on the politics of religion, whether oppositional or hegemonic, than on the languages, gestures, communities, and selves which the English Reformation, with its many contradictions, produced. They attempt to understand what it made possible rather than what it prohibited.

What, for instance, are we to make of a state religion that demanded passive obedience and yet honored as martyrs those slaughtered for disobeying the combined authority of Crown and Church? How do we reconcile the Bible’s frequent attenuation of social distinctions with its use by Tudor–Stuart officialdom as a chief authority for political hierarchy? (How, indeed, did they?) How do our notions of Renaissance patriarchy come to terms with the homoerotics, masochism, and gender inversions that haunt early modern devotional language? What about the fact that Protestantism imagined “the Godly” as an exclusive company, and the national church comprehended every English person (thus prompting the scorn of sectarian Henry Barrow in 1588: “who is not baptised in Englande? Who is not of their church?”)?⁷ What, especially, are we to do with the clear evidence that hierarchy – whether political or spiritual – was often not perceived as a form of oppression and restriction, but, on the contrary, joyfully embraced? For many Tudor–Stuart believers, the “real” of religion – its norms, values, rewards – was at least as palpable as secular experience – a materiality which was as disconcerting to contemporary political authorities as it is to our own critical sensibilities. If there is one thing that religion tells us about Reformation England, it is that a calculus of social action predicated on power interests alone is not sufficient to explain many of its events – unless those forms of power and interest are redefined to include some highly symbolic, not to say mysterious, investments.

In the process of exploring the range and reach of religious identities, these essays in turn redefine the notion of the political. For while new-historicist work has sought to explore the ideological

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

locales of literature, it has tended to define the social and the political in modern terms: that is, as the negotiation of competing power interests. On this model (which often governs political history as well) religion becomes an ideological mask for *realpolitik*. Much current cultural analysis shares with its marxisant provenance the suspicion that religion is merely among the most articulate of a culture's containment mechanisms, and the critic able to perceive it as such correspondingly exempt from such mystification. (As Freud confidently put it, "no one, needless to say, who shares a delusion ever recognizes it as such.")⁸ This despite the self-conscious recognition on the part of Renaissance thinkers that such demystification not only existed, but could coexist with belief. Calvin, for instance, is perfectly aware that "some" hold "that religion was the contrivance of a few subtle and designing men, a political machine to confine the simple multitude to their duty, while those who inculcated the worship of God on others, were themselves far from believing that any god existed."⁹ We should remember that early modern religion was the least innocent or untheorized of ideological systems; indeed, if there is anything that should guard against a summary judgment of religion's opiate sway it is the fact that religion provided this culture with a language of justice and political critique.

A further virtue of the cultural study of religious identity is the heavy weather it makes for a unified or totalized vision of political process. Unlike the English monarchy, English Christianity was not, even symbolically, a single person or place. Even if we specify it as Tudor–Stuart, and conformist, it remains phenomenologically dispersed, comprising not only personal belief in some supernatural presence and its work in the world, but a ritual practice, a political institution, a social system, and a group identity. In the sixteenth century alone the state suffered as many changes of religion as it did monarch. The picture is equally complex when one shifts from a diachronic to a synchronic perspective, and from a temporal to a geographical lens. At any given moment, Britain, and England within it, exhibited a complex texture of religious practices and beliefs. Differences of geography, ethnicity, and cosmopolitanism were intensified and complicated by religious difference, and vice versa. The Bible in English, held to be the great standard of national identity and popular literacy alike, was also mandated in Wales, where English was not the native language. Scotland's religion was over the course of this period on occasion both more and less

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Protestant than that of its southern neighbors; and the tenacious Catholicism of Ireland proved among the most intractable obstacles to England's attempt to bring it under colonial rule. So too the continent offered other models against which, and in concert with which, England articulated its own identity: not only Roman but Reformed churches served as both antagonists and affiliates at different times. Both the Armada and the wars of the Dutch republic were key pressure points for English self-definition. John Aylmer notoriously claimed in 1558 that "God is English," but unlike England's Queen, God was not *semper eadem* (nor even *semper idem*).

Other variables assert themselves. The role of print culture is of prime importance:¹⁰ what books, what editions of a book, what price and readers of a book determine the dissemination of belief? The differences between Protestantism and Catholicism must be considered, but so must those internal to Protestantism itself: scholarship has made it clear that the commonplace binary of "Anglican" and "Puritan" will not do as a taxonomic tool; more recent work has started to debate the proportions of Calvinism in English theology.¹¹ Tudor–Stuart religion diverges not only along temporal, geographic, and ideological lines, but also according to site, mode and genre: an official state church, the universities, a royal chapel, a conventicle, a priest hole, a theater, a homily, a private prayer, prophesyings, Paul's Cross sermons, mysticism, popular superstition, lyric, church ales, bawdy court, parish perambulations, every birth, marriage, and death. Part of the problem with mounting any inquiry into the social function of religion is not that it is elusive but that it is everywhere. Such ubiquity and variety of location make it extremely difficult, indeed foolish, to attempt the kind of generalizing and totalizing claims about "culture" that have allowed literary historians to generate their readings of how literary texts locate themselves, "for or agin," within it.

Moving from the community to the individual complicates the picture yet further. It seems reasonable to assume that the religious experience of an English person would have been inflected by historical moment, geographical location, social status, age, and gender – to name just a few factors. Furthermore, to identify a theology is a far cry from specifying the mixtures of values, sentiments, emotions, convictions, and practices that constitute individual devotion. The authors most of interest to literary scholars in this regard are so not because their brand of religion is so apparent but

Introduction

7

because it is so complexly layered and multiply determined, evincing a slippage between official doctrine and personal belief that preoccupied the Tudor–Stuart authorities as well as modern scholars. Inquiry into the conduct of faith can perhaps more than any other lens focus the enigma of what it means to believe in something.

Issues such as these suggest why religion is so unwieldy and yet so rich an object for cultural study: it forces a reconsideration of models of politics and practice and belief, of motives and interest. It complicates our categories. Above all, the brief of this collection is to consider religion as something other than a containment mechanism or a code – to move beyond either rendering religion in the reductive terms of social control or as mere phraseology for the “more real” concerns of power politics. The relations of culture and religion put into question the relation of the real and its encodement, and suggest this bond is not a question of a material “base” and an ideological “superstructure,” and that religion is not merely a rhetorical set of names for something more trenchant, a way to dress or disguise the movements of capital and power. It is, rather, something in and of itself.

The twelve essays which follow are divided into two groups. The first six essays are principally concerned with how religion figured the contours of English group identity (what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined community”):¹² how, for instance, biblical and exegetical typologies described the inhabitants of a godly community, and whether that community was coterminous with the nation, or with the state, or with international Protestantism. From whence was the impetus for community – from above or below? – and who belonged to the community that Protestantism described? Was England “the” elect or “an” elect nation of God, and was such a notion responsive to political circumstances? How did the imagination of religious community tally – or not – with a sense of political order?

Patrick Collinson thus discusses how the rhetoric of Old Testament prophecy supplied Tudor–Stuart preachers with a rhetoric of national unity, and yet how this preaching, by insistently distinguishing between the sinful multitude and a godly remnant, fostered a divisiveness that seemed almost intended to destroy any sense of national community. In the next essay, David Scott Kastan likewise suggests that the England engendered by the Reformation was riven by the very terms of its genesis. His essay, which traces the various

attempts to translate, print, and disseminate the vernacular Bible in Henrician England, argues that the English Bible (and, by implication, the English Reformation) was an instrument neither of emergent nationalism nor of royal absolutism. A vernacular Bible was published and read despite the reservations of king, bishops, and peers – a victory of reforming zeal over royal will prophetic of things to come.

Both of these essays also reveal how deeply community is invested in and by textuality. Jesse Lander examines how texts are themselves produced by specific political moments; in particular, how different moments left their mark on the various editions of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, and in turn, how these editions imply radically different visions of English religious nationhood. This work makes it clear how attentive any claims about the English nation must be to the material particularities of a given text and its communities of production.

If a shifting religious climate fragments a text like Foxe's *Acts* into multiple, discrete versions, religion also, quite literally, bound together (*re-ligere*) communities over time. Focusing on the itinerary of the stigmata in Catholic and Protestant exegesis, Lowell Gallagher thus demonstrates "the scope and force of a transhistorical communicability through which cultural values are both conserved and transformed." It is a concern peculiarly appropriate to this period, in which so many cultural values, particularly religious ones, were recast but not necessarily discredited despite radical and insistent challenges.

Our notions of how belief is formed and disseminated have always relied heavily on imagining the (usually antipathetic) exchanges between authority and people. In her essay on Richard Hooker, however, Debora Shuger argues that Hooker's *Laws* attempts to salvage Augustine's vision of Christian community as that which overcomes the ancient opposition between popular and elite religion (between what sixteenth-century Puritans called the superstitious multitude and the godly few). The problem of incorporating both the simpler sort and their betters into a single community haunts the *Laws* – motivating its unusual definition of the church as a "visible mystical body," whose relation to the body politic turns out to be unexpectedly tenuous and tangential. The *Laws* thus identifies – and grapples with – one of the most deeply productive and problematic features of Western Christianity: the existence of mystical bodies within forms of nationhood.

Introduction

9

William J. Bouwsma's essay, which concludes this first section, also studies Hooker: his anthropology, his historicism, and his conception of the *via media*. But Bouwsma resists the local, synchronic focus typical of most new-historicist work, instead pointing out the *Laws'* Greco-Roman and European matrices. His essay thus offers a rather timely reminder about the limitations of situating Tudor–Stuart religion only within national and early modern contexts; any study of English religion must calibrate the effects of both European Christianity and ancient culture.

These six essays trace the multiple axes which figure and divide English religious identity in this period. But interpreting sermons, polemics, or theological treatises is a different enterprise from interpreting the religious valencing of a sonnet, epic, or play. How, precisely? The second group of essays, all of which deal with the exchanges and affinities between religious and literary language, takes up this question.

In the opening essay of this section, Janel Mueller argues that Foxe's accounts of the Marian martyrs come to provide a rich tropic resource for the major religious poets of the seventeenth century: Donne, Herbert, and Milton. By figuring "a burning human body as an offering that the self makes to God," the *Acts and Monuments* implies a construction of the embodied human subject, one that profoundly influences subsequent devotional poetry because it seemed to compensate for Protestantism's rejection of a Catholic ontology of presence.

Richard C. McCoy's essay on the "enigmas of both love and martyrdom" in Shakespeare's poetry grapples with the question of how contemporary events are registered in and by lyric, suggesting that the evasiveness with which Shakespeare's poems resist yet hint at political allegory is matched only by the evasiveness with which they resist yet hint at theological commitment. Like Gallagher, McCoy simultaneously draws on and challenges deconstructive methodology in order to call attention to the ways in which religious beliefs are transformed and conserved even in the process of being emptied out. He reads the wistfulness of sonnets 124 and 125 as indebted to the elegiac regard that the Reformation imposed upon former sites of meaning such as sacrifice and sacrament. If Shakespeare's poetic renderings of sacrificial love finally do not, despite their thick sacral resonances, affirm transcendent values, yet "for all their terrible evanescence and frailty," they remain "sacred

objects of a sort,” relics still fragrant with something “precious and enduring.”

Mueller and McCoy are both concerned with the ways in which post-Reformation Christological poetics figure an embodied self and how that figuration registers the losses and gains that the Reformation entailed. Michael Schoenfeldt’s essay on the devotional lyrics of Amelia Lanyer and John Donne explores the significance of gender for the imagination of that devout body. Schoenfeldt considers the impact of the increasingly masculinized Protestant God on the language of religious eros, as well as the tension between Christianity and the Tudor–Stuart social order that gender exposes. Most importantly, he raises the question of the status of religious affect in current critical interpretation: “whereas we post-Freudians tend to conceive of religious sentiment as a sublimation of an essentially gendered eroticism, the devotional universe inhabited by Lanyer and Donne was far more likely to think of religious worship as a primal and essential desire in contradistinction to its brief and unsatisfying sublimations into terrestrial eros.”

Which is the sublime, and which is the sublimated? What is “the real,” and how is it represented? In what is perhaps the most polemical of these essays, Robert N. Watson argues that in *Othello*, Shakespeare allegorizes (however obliquely) and advocates (however subtly) Protestant doctrine. “Othello’s tragedy,” he argues, “transposes solifidianism – salvation by faith alone – into the realm of marriage”; and in pointing out the play’s relation to contemporary anti-Catholic polemic, Watson reflects on Shakespeare’s own ideological engagement as well as the complex relation of religious and erotic faiths.

Finally, in the concluding essay of the volume, Richard Strier explores Milton’s relation to classical notions of *magnanimitas*, or “proper pride.” Surveying a range of Milton’s prose and poetry, Strier argues that Milton’s ethics were primarily classical rather than Christian (or at least rather than Calvinist); he was not fond of humility. The final essay of each section thus asserts the importance of classical thought for early modern English religious texts: if both England and religion are something in and of themselves, they are also situated within and shaped by the intellectual culture of the West.

All of the essays are united by their common recognition of the massive centrality of religion to this period’s cultural imagination