Introduction

Europe's sixteenth century was an age of faith. Religion could be found everywhere, not only in churches and liturgies but in financial transactions, legal proceedings and scientific treatises. Spirituality structured the intimacy of family life no less than the conduct of foreign wars. Even time was reckoned according to sacred rhythms: so many hours to matins, so many weeks to Michaelmas, so many years since the incarnation of Christ. So pervasive was religion, in fact, that the great revolution of the early modern world was not a conflict over political philosophy or economic resources but rather a dispute over the path to Christian salvation. By destabilising traditional religion, the Protestant Reformation sent violent shock waves through even the most seemingly stable communities and institutions. As old certainties were questioned, old loyalties tested and old practices undermined, the Reformation seemed to dissolve the glue that held together the familiar coherence of the social world.

Yet if the centrality of religion for sixteenth-century experience underscores the importance of the Reformation, it also makes the Reformation very difficult to explain. For how could radically divisive ideologies have developed so swiftly within an intellectual framework so fundamental to contemporary society? Why would a revolution have been accepted or embraced by a population so heavily invested in the very belief system that the revolutionaries sought to disturb? These questions have been pondered for centuries, and they constitute the highest peaks that a Reformation historian might hope to climb; given their inherent complexity, it is unlikely that any scholar could scale them in a lifetime. This book suggests, however, that one possible approach to these peaks – from a base-camp, as it were, within the comparatively manageable subfield of Tudor England – might be to turn the questions themselves inside out and approach the issue of religious change indirectly. For, if religion permeated every aspect of sixteenth-century experience, that implies that religion itself was not a rigid or self-contained sphere but rather was structured through its interactions with the culture in which it was imbedded. Paradoxically, then, the very pervasiveness of religion in
the early modern world obliges us to explore the process of religious change not only in formal spiritual settings but also in more mundane sites where the social meanings of religion were constructed and contested.¹

This book thus suggests that an analysis of popular politics allows us to understand the English Reformation – and, mutatis mutandis, the European Reformation more generally – in fundamentally new and more satisfying ways. Approaching the Reformation through a study of popular politics may seem peculiar, not only because it appears open to charges of reductionism, but because an influential revisionist movement among Tudor historians would purport to render the whole project redundant. English people, we have been told, were almost uniformly conservative, stubbornly resisting a Reformation foisted upon them by a ‘predatory Crown on the prowl’, as J. J. Scarisbrick has eloquently termed the Tudor regime.² Yet, twenty years after Scarisbrick challenged the notion of a ‘popular Reformation’ in England, the remarkable penetration of England’s ‘Reformation from above’ remains largely unexplained. After all, the Tudor government possessed no bureaucracy, no police force, no standing army, and was utterly reliant upon local collaboration – from the haughtiest justice of the peace to the lowliest village constable – for the maintenance of ordinary administration. For whatever reasons, these local officials, as well as the peasants who were all-too-capable of unseating them when their duties conflicted with popular expectations, accommodated some aspects of the Reformation, embraced others and only occasionally reacted with unambiguous opposition. Only by exploring these conflicting responses can we hope to transcend the intractable revisionist paradox that the English Reformation produced a ‘Protestant nation, but not a nation of Protestants’.³


¹ Similarly broad conceptions of the Reformation and its cultural consequences can be found in, e.g., Alexandra Walsham, Providence in Early Modern England (Oxford, 1999); Susan Karant-Nunn, Zwickau in Transition, 1500–1547: The Reformation as an Agent of Change (Columbus, Ohio, 1987); David Sabean, Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany (Cambridge, 1984); Robert Scribner, Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany (London, 1987).
voice tells the narrator to open the Scriptures and read whatever passage he falls upon. When Augustine reads the admonition in Romans 13:13 to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires’, he finds that he needs no further study: ‘For instantly even with the end of this sentence, by a light, as it were, of confidence now darted into my heart, all the darkness of doubting vanished away.’ These epiphanies, moved by the workings of the Holy Spirit in humble and receptive vessels, were conversions simultaneously of mind, soul and heart, the sorts of absolute breaks from the past that the later evangelical John Bunyan represented through his allegorical Christian, abandoning home and family in favour of ‘life, life, eternal life’. Such conversions were, in a word, revolutionary. They represented the liberation of the divine within souls crushed by sin and the subsequent creation of new men out of the ashes of the old, not unlike eighteenth-century French ‘citizens’ or twentieth-century Russian ‘comrades’ working, as they believed, to liberate the untapped potential of oppressed human beings.

It should perhaps be obvious that, in reality, such remarkable and total conversions are extremely rare in any human society; continuity always pulls heartlessly at the seams of revolution. Moreover, if these absolute conversions are rare among individuals, they are virtually unthinkable on a wider national scale; for a society to ‘become Christian’ or ‘become Protestant’ in the manner of Saul becoming Paul, too many of the threads that tie together thought, history and culture would necessarily have to be severed. Yet historians of the English Reformation, working in the tradition of such eminent sixteenth-century scholar–divines as John Bale and John Foxe, have until recently held remarkably tightly to the revolutionary ideal in their discussions of how England broke from the Roman yoke and embraced a new religion. The expulsion of the pope and the translation of the Bible cleared a path for the Holy Spirit to enter English hearts; the sermons of Hugh Latimer and the liturgies of Thomas Cranmer gave England a True Church; and Bloody Mary’s terrible fires cauterised England’s ragged amputation from Rome, bringing all but the hardest hearts into the fold just as surely as did the martyrdoms of the early Church. By 1559, then, the nation’s conversion was over and something called the Church of England had been born, leaving the new dilemma of over-zealous puritanism, rather than the old dilemma of irascible Catholicism, as the principal threat to English religious unity. Scales had fallen from their eyes indeed.

---

6 The traditional interpretation of the English Reformation can be found in such classic works as Gilbert Burnet, *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, ed. Nicholas Pocock,
This narrative, while always opposed by a Catholic counter-narrative, has only recently been challenged from within and systematically dismantled by a revisionist movement among English Reformation scholars. The agenda for revisionism was first established in 1975 with Christopher Haigh’s *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire.* Haigh’s classic study of one of the realm’s ‘dark corners’ explored the difficulties faced by a government attempting to import an extrinsic Reformation into a fundamentally conservative culture. First, he showed that, far from being disenchanted with medieval Catholicism and hankering for reform, most Lancastrians were satisfied with their Church and the spiritual nourishment it provided. Second, he traced the enforcement of the Reformation upon a largely unwilling public, painting a picture of reluctant and disingenuous rather than enthusiastic Reformation. Third, he explored the deep divisions that arose in Elizabethan Lancashire as a result of the Reformation, concluding that, as the population settled into a conservative, hybrid form of worship, it remained the task of Protestant preachers to evangelise and convert the common people.

Haigh’s attempts to undermine commonplace assumptions about the success of Protestantism were echoed by a variety of other historians, most notably J. J. Scarisbrick and Eamon Duffy. These scholars expanded Haigh’s ideas into new narratives of the Reformation in which religious change was an aggressive and destructive process, not a movement of liberation but a violent attack on traditional society by an avaricious government. For Scarisbrick, the centrepiece of Reformation history became the resistance strategies employed by English subjects to counter the Tudor juggernaut. The Reformation, in this view, accomplished only negative goals like the destruction of church fabric; it erected nothing in place of the old religion, which thus remained the most potent and ‘popular’ belief system in England throughout the sixteenth century. Duffy had a somewhat darker view, suggesting that, because late-medieval Catholicism was a religion built around communal solidarity and outward ceremony, the regime’s elimination of the external trappings of traditional religion had enormous effects. For Duffy, the breathtaking beauty of traditional worship could not be re-erected once its foundation was undermined, so the failure of Protestants to convert the masses was, for conservatives, at best a pyrrhic victory.

---


8 Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*.

As Haigh noted, two sets of questions were implicit in the revisionist critique. First was whether the Reformation was energised from above or below, in other words whether religious change was an expression of popular aspirations or an act of state enforced upon the populace. Second was whether the Reformation occurred quickly or slowly, that is whether the traditional demarcation point in Tudor history, the Elizabethan religious settlement of 1559, marked the end of the English Reformation or simply one stage in a much longer struggle for ideological control of the nation. The revisionist position, then, was a response to studies like A. G. Dickens’s *English Reformation* that had described the Reformation as rapid and from below. Haigh and his fellow travellers instead suggested it was slow and from above, not being completed, if indeed it ever was, until the middle of Elizabeth’s reign at the earliest.

Revisionism, in all its different formulations, has had a tremendous and largely beneficial influence on our understanding of the English Reformation, and few historians today would deny that in a simple contest between A. G. Dickens’s interpretation on the one hand, and Haigh’s or Duffy’s interpretation on the other, Haigh and Duffy win hands down. The anti-Catholic prejudices embedded in the traditional model have rightfully been overthrown, and the newer interpretations have forced us to appreciate the coherence and vitality of the religious system that was so violently ripped apart in the middle decades of the sixteenth century. Yet, for all its benefits, the revisionist model remains no less imprisoned than its predecessor in a paradigm defined by the phantasmagoric goal of ‘national conversion’. ‘Success’ for the Reformation remains a composite of individual religious conversions, each heaped upon the next, until the mass of Protestants in England tips some notional interpretive scales and the nation itself becomes Protestant. Listen, for instance, to Haigh trying to count the number of Protestants in Queen Mary’s England:

We do not know about all mid-Tudor Protestants, or even all the Protestant cells. The Protestant iceberg certainly had a submerged section, but how large was it? What proportion of all Protestants were the 3,000 possibles discovered by combing the records from 1525 to 1558, or the 280 known to have been burned between 1555 and 1558? One in ten? One in a hundred? One in a thousand? We cannot

---


told, but even the biggest multiplier would create only a small fraction of the total population... Is it likely, given the shortage of Protestant preaching and common hostility of popular response, that Protestants became even a large minority in only a short period? Could even a Latimer or a Bradford or a Knox shatter old loyalties and create a new consciousness by occasional evangelical forays?11

By focusing his understanding of the Reformation so narrowly on the small minority in whom was created ‘a new consciousness’, Haigh uncritically adopts the analytic categories of the most radical reformers, dividing the world into two rival camps no less starkly than Latimer, Bradford and Knox themselves. In assuming that the confessional lens is the only lens that matters, he neatly dismisses as irrelevant to the Reformation’s ‘success’ such fundamental transformations as the undermining of the four-century-old papal primacy, the erosion of the purgatorial scheme of salvation at the centre of medieval worship, and the almost complete destruction of the physical infrastructure of traditional religion. Hence Haigh can argue that, despite the success of the government in achieving conformity to its ‘political’ Reformation, the Protestant Reformation – always defined in evangelical terms – remained largely a failure.12 This is, in a sense, a theological argument masquerading as an historical one.

Of course, at an empirical level the revisionists are correct to say that few English people experienced Damascene conversions in the first half of the sixteenth century. Yet this observation might more usefully serve as the beginning of an analysis of the English Reformation rather than the end of one: if people did not convert en masse to Protestantism, what did they do? The whole notion of ‘success’ and ‘failure’, I would suggest, imposes severe limitations on the kinds of questions we can ask of the Reformation. By asking whether England ‘became Protestant’, we accept the notion, itself imbedded in a confessional understanding of the period, that the Reformation was essentially about religious conversion. Yet it is easy to show examples of people who did not ‘become Protestant’ none the less acting in ways that would have been unthinkable only a few years before. Some people plundered religious institutions, others denounced their priests in royal courts for their attachment to Rome, still others used English Bibles to construct arguments against the economic exploitation of the peasantry. These are all instances of ‘Reformation’, neatly traceable to Luther’s revolt, yet none required an ideological commitment to sola fide or sola scriptura. Similarly, it is easy to show examples of conventionally pious Catholics arguing bitterly with one another over the nature of their Catholicism: what role did Rome play in True Religion? How could essential doctrine be distinguished from adiaphora? Did the unity of Christ’s True Church depend upon the unity of the visible, institutional Church? Studying these fissures in traditional religion

reveals a profound process of change; the ways people understood and legitimized even the most traditional beliefs altered dramatically. These changes represented an incursion of religious innovation into English culture without necessitating that the people who actualised them did so systematically, and without requiring the sorts of epiphanies that we associate with conversion narratives. We see in these phenomena neither the ‘success’ nor the ‘failure’ of the Reformation, but rather a process of cultural accommodation that is not easily mappable onto a simple,confessional axis.

In other words, the whole meta-narrative of conversion which historians have used to conceptualise the Reformation has impeded our ability to ask a different set of questions, to see the Reformation not in globalising terms but as a more piecemeal process in which politics and spiritual change were irrevocably intertwined. This perspective might be accused of reductionism, denying that the Reformation was motivated by genuine ideological commitment. Yet, on the contrary, it does not deny that evangelical conversion was possible, but simply asks what modes of analysis remain open to the historian once it is conceded that few such conversions in fact occurred. Rather than beginning and ending with the few sixteenth-century English people who experienced the Reformation as a coherent battle between two incommensurate worldviews, this analysis concentrates on the majority who neither wholly accepted nor wholly opposed the Reformation. For these people, ideas were not always solid objects stacked like bricks in coherent ideologies, but rather were rapidly shifting modalities that could have different meanings in different contexts. The ideas themselves are still central; no one is accused of acting disingenuously. But, in the practical world of political negotiation, ideas can be disassociated from their moorings and put to disparate uses. Far from being antithetical to the notion that ideas have power in history, this study argues that the amphibiousness and ambidexterity of new religious ideas is exactly what allowed them to penetrate English culture, seeping into the myriad crevices in the dominant belief system where ideas and practices were not fully aligned. Hence, sites of social friction like disputes between priests and their parishioners, or disputes between princes and their people, were exactly the places where new ideas were brought most forcibly to bear. It was at these sites that even subtle changes in beliefs could alter political dynamics in important and tangible ways, leading to significant changes in people's relationship to the sacred even if those people never imagined themselves as enemies of the old religion.

If, in the view of some revisionists, there were successful ‘political Reformations’ in Tudor England but not a successful Protestant Reformation, it immediately becomes incumbent upon us to examine the religious life of...
the people in terms divorced from the political. In other words, a history of sixteenth-century religion becomes a study of ‘popular piety’, a notional convergence of inward beliefs and outward ceremonial practices that forms, in an almost Durkheimian sense, a religious sphere within society. To this end, numerous historians in the past decade have made ‘popular piety’ their object of study, leading to an enormous growth in our knowledge of popular religious practices and the place of those practices in traditional society.

Revisionists, it should be noted, are far from agreed about the content of ‘popular piety’ in the early sixteenth century. The most comprehensive and convincing account is Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars*, which describes a richly complex religion based in communal solidarity and the outward, ceremonial forms of worship. Christian piety consisted of participation in a vast structure of observance, from processing along the parish boundaries at Rogationtide to mortifying the flesh by ‘creeping to the cross’ on Good Friday. Every aspect of social life was constructed around the Church, from the cycles of feast and fast by which people measured time, to the great ‘bede rolls’ through which they remembered their dead. Duffy’s analysis of the complexities of traditional religion, however, does not sit easily with Haigh’s understanding of late-medieval Catholicism as an essentially easy religion that presented a less arduous alternative than the strict Biblicism and austerity of Protestantism. Haigh suggested that traditional Catholicism provided ‘religious minimalists’ with ‘an undemanding scheme of salvation which rewarded decent living and participation in the sacraments; the Church would do the rest’. It was these ‘minimalist’ Christians, in Haigh’s opinion, who rejected the new religion most forcefully, since ‘the Protestant insistence that justification came from faith in Christ undercut the status and the prospects of the unthinking’. While Duffy might grant the existence of these ‘unthinking’ Catholics, he would hardly ascribe to them the central role they play for Haigh; indeed, their presence undercuts Duffy’s central claim that ‘no substantial gulf existed between the religion of the clergy and the educated elite on the one hand and that of the people at large on the other’.

The most important flowering of scholarship on ‘popular piety’, however, has come from historians following in the wake of the revisionists but not strictly adhering to their interpretations. The work of Beat Kümin, for instance, followed Duffy by focusing on the parish as the basic unit through which English people organised their religious experience. It was at the community level, in this analysis, that such important phenomena as prayers for the dead, the worship of saints and the rituals of prayer were all understood.

13 Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*; see also Duffy, *Voices of Morebath.*
Yet, diverging from Duffy, Kümin suggested that to understand religious change at the popular level we must look at how the economic organisation of the parish gradually shifted. Historians such as Andrew Brown and Martha Skeeters have studied the contours of traditional religion in individual localities, adding encyclopedic knowledge of local customs to our general sense of late medieval and early modern Catholicism as a religious system. Caroline Litzenberger has most recently focused this technique on one particular source, wills from the county of Gloucestershire, providing a far more careful treatment than was previously available and showing the wide range of language through which sixteenth-century testators could express their beliefs. These and other studies are to be commended for their attempts to peer through the fog of religious conflict and analyse the thought-systems of the ordinary people to whom the various confessions would increasingly appeal. Kümin’s study was particularly successful in capturing not just the theoretical contours of those thought-systems, but the fault lines that inevitably emerged in their practice, for instance the structural difficulties faced by parishes balancing the saving of souls with the investment of scarce resources.

Within the concepts of ‘popular piety’ or ‘popular religion’ invoked by all these works, however, there lurk some rather formidable theoretical pitfalls. Most importantly, it is by no means clear that the delineation of a Durkheimian sphere of ‘religious’ belief and practice makes sense in a sixteenth-century context. This is not only because, as scholars habitually note, every aspect of early modern society was imbued with religion, but also because religious belief and practice was never understood solely as a private exercise reflecting the conscience of the practitioner. As Duffy has shown, worship was largely a communal activity; even salvation, which we might


Popular Politics and the English Reformation

assume to be a private matter between Christ and the individual Christian, was in practice mediated by the efforts of family, friends, priests and saints. As such, religious order depended to a large degree upon social cohesion, and the maintenance of a properly functioning Church was therefore a task shared by officials at all levels of government, both ecclesiastical and civil. For instance, while ecclesiastical courts had jurisdiction over offences against the Church, those courts were overseen by bishops who were themselves appointed by the Crown and held high offices of state. The resources of individual parishes were received and redistributed by lay churchwardens, who might also hold petty offices from the royal government or sit on manorial juries under the jurisdiction of local landlords. The ‘advowsons’ of clerical livings, the right to appoint priests to their positions as parsons, were often held by laymen, and at law the right of ‘advowson’ was treated as a piece of property that could be bought, sold or leased. Priests were maintained through tithes, but tithes were often farmed by laymen who leased the collection rights. When the church courts condemned heretics to death, the Church could not execute those heretics but rather had to hand them over to the royal government for burning. Many other examples could be given of the absolute dependence of traditional religion on the unity and univocality of Church and state.

Usually such nuances were irrelevant to the practical functioning of parish religion, and, indeed, many historians of European Catholicism have stressed the autonomy that communities traditionally exercised over their own religious lives. The mid sixteenth century, however, was no ordinary time. The English Reformation, as an act of state intended to diminish the power and jurisdiction of the Church, energised exactly those fault lines in Christian society where piety collided with politics. Religious observance had always received much of its meaning from its invocation of properly constituted authority; going to church could not be divorced from what we might call its ‘civil’ functions – reinforcing community, hierarchy and obedience – any more than the state could function without divine sanction. But, if a properly functioning Church depended upon the invocation of an idealised social and political harmony, what were Christians to do when that harmony was fractured by a dispute between Church and Crown, especially a dispute played out in their own communities? If a radical priest altered the forms of local worship, for instance, was ‘traditional religion’ better maintained by obeying that priest or disobeying him? If a Catholic priest committed treason by defending the authority of the pope, did his conservative parishioners see, for instance, Jean Delumeau, Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation (London, 1977); Henry Kamen, The Phoenix and the Flame: Catalonia and the Counter-Reformation (New Haven, Conn., 1993); Philip Hoffman, Church and Community in the Diocese of Lyon, 1500–1789 (New Haven, Conn., 1984).