

## THE STRIPPING OF THE ALTARS



# THE STRIPPING OF THE ALTARS

Traditional Religion in England  
c.1400–c.1580

EAMON DUFFY

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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*Deus, qui nos patrem et matrem honorare praecepisti,  
miserere clementer animabus patris et matris meae, eorumque  
peccata dimitte, meque cum illis in aeternae claritatis gaudio fac vivere.  
Per Christum Dominum Nostrum. Amen.*

From the Mass for the Dead,  
*Missale ad Usus Insignis et Praeclarae Ecclesiae Sarum*,  
ed. F. H. Dickinson, 1861–83, col. 873\*.



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My wife and children have not only suffered, and suffered from, my growing preoccupation with the religion of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English parishioners, but have supported me through it. If the dedication of this book had not already been made, it would go by rights to them.

E.D.

College of St Mary Magdalene, Cambridge  
Lent, 1992

# PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

## I

One of my schoolmasters liked to tell of a visit in his own schooldays to Gloucester Cathedral, during which he had overheard two tourists, one of them a Roman Catholic priest, holding forth on the iniquities of the Reformation, and deploring the sad fact that the great church was now in Protestant hands. "Just think", declared the priest, "all this was *ours* once upon a time". This was too much for a Cathedral verger, who had also been listening with visibly mounting indignation to this tirade. Unable to contain himself any longer, he bustled forward: "if you don't mind me saying so sir," he declared, "it would *still* be yours, if only you'd behaved yourselves"!

The verger's unbeatable repartee captured precisely an account of the Reformation which was widely accepted in England, by scholars as well as the man in the pew, till fairly recently. Even entirely secular people took it as axiomatic that Protestantism was, if not necessarily true, then at least not obviously and ludicrously false, like Roman Catholicism. Believers and unbelievers were agreed that whatever the true claims of Christianity, the Reformation was a vital stage along the road to modernity, the cleansing of the English psyche from priestcraft, ignorance and superstition.

The basic assumptions of this historiography were hilariously fictionalized in Kingsley Amis's novel *The Alteration*, set in a hypothetical 1960s, in which the English Reformation had never happened. Martin Luther himself had not rebelled, but had become Pope Germanicus I, and Prince Arthur of England had not died, so his younger brother Henry had not become King Henry VIII. Instead, Henry had led a rebellion of Protestant malcontents, and his followers had all been banished to New England. The whole course of Western history had thus been utterly altered, and Europe in the 1960s was therefore locked into a suffocating Catholic Habsburg tyranny, where papal talent scouts roamed the continent to identify boys with lovely voices, who were then castrated and taken back to Rome to grace the Sistine Chapel choir. Electricity, free thought and modern civilization had become the

monopoly of Protestant New England, and the book turns on the attempts of a group of misfits and anticlericals to rescue a choirboy from Coverley Cathedral from a fate worse than death.

*The Stripping of the Altars*, first published in 1992, was, among other things, an attempt to contribute a shovelful of history to the burial of the venerable historiographical consensus which underlay both the verger's riposte and Amis's brilliant satire. The book was informed by a conviction that the Reformation as actually experienced by ordinary people was not an uncomplicated imaginative liberation, the restoration of true Christianity after a period of degeneration and corruption, but, for good or ill, a great cultural hiatus, which had dug a ditch, deep and dividing, between the English people and their past. Over the course of three generations a millennium of splendour – the worlds of Gregory and Bede and Anselm and Francis and Dominic and Bernard and Dante, all that had constituted and nourished the mind and heart of Christendom for a thousand years – became alien territory, the dark ages of "popery". Sixteenth-century Protestantism was built on a series of noble affirmations – the sovereignty of the grace of God in salvation, the free availability of that grace to all who sought it, the self-revelation of God in his holy word. But it quickly clenched itself round a series of negations and rejections. As its proponents smashed the statues, whitewashed the churches and denounced the Pope and the Mass, Protestantism came to be constituted in large part by its NO to medieval religion.

*The Stripping of the Altars*, then, was at one level an elegy for a world we had lost, a world of great beauty and power which it seemed to me the reformers – and many historians ever since – had misunderstood, traduced and destroyed. It was only after the book had been published, and began to be debated, that I came to realize that the energy and engagement which had helped to produce it, and which gave it some of its rhetorical force, did not belong entirely in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Till my early teens I had been brought up in the Ireland of the 1950s, and the religion of my childhood had a good deal in common with the symbolic world of the late Middle Ages. My later teens had exactly coincided with the Second Vatican Council, of which I was an eager observer. That Council had triggered the dismantling of much of what had seemed immemorial and permanent in my own inner imaginative landscape, as the externals of the ritual life of the Catholic Church were drastically altered and simplified. My account of the English Reformation presented it less as an institutional and doctrinal transformation than a ritual one, "the stripping of the altars": in retrospect, I see that the intensity of focus I brought to my task as an historian was nourished by my own experience of another such ritual transformation. In Seamus Heaney's poem *Station Island*, the nineteenth-century writer William Carleton declares that

We are earthworms of the earth, and all that  
Has gone through us is what will be our trace.<sup>1</sup>

True of poets, that is also supremely true of historians, for there is, of course, no such thing as a presupposition-less observer. All historians who aspire to be more than chroniclers derive their imaginative insight and energy from somewhere, and if reading and research provide the core materials, our own experience provides us with the sensitivities – and no doubt the blind-spots – which make what we do with that material distinctive. The book, as rigorously and exhaustively based as I was capable of making it on a mass of historical, literary and material evidence, was also shaped and informed by the imaginative and symbolic revolution through which I myself had lived in the 1960s and 1970s.

## II

As an intellectual project, then, *The Stripping of the Altars* was conceived as a contribution to an adequate understanding of both medieval English Catholicism, and of the Reformation which swept that Catholicism away. But it should be read neither as a *Summa* of late medieval religion nor, in any straightforward sense, as a history of the English Reformation. An exhaustive exploration of late medieval English religion would have to have included extended discussion of the role of the religious orders, especially the Friars, whose influence on urban religion in particular was profound throughout the later Middle Ages, and remained so to the very eve of the Dissolution. *The Stripping of the Altars*, however, is focused primarily on the religion of the lay parishioner, and has almost nothing to say about the religious orders (or, for that matter, about the clergy in general). By the same token, the second part of the book, which deals with the processes and impact of the Reformation on the traditional religion of the parishes and parishioners of mid-Tudor England, has little to say about the positive attractions of the Protestant Gospel, or about those who willingly embraced it. As a result, some readers and reviewers have scratched – or shaken – their heads over what to make of a history of the Reformation which appeared to call in question the very existence of convinced Protestants.

Any such puzzlements will be resolved, I hope, by attention to the book's defining subtitle – "*Traditional Religion in England c. 1400–1580*". It is the religion of the conservative majority which this book sets out to explore, and it ends at the point at which I believe majority adherence to the forms and belief-system of late medieval Catholicism

<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground, Poems 1966–1996*, London, 1998, p. 247.

was tipping or had tipped over into widespread acceptance of a contrasting and inimical Reformation world-view.

The book was thus intended as a contribution towards a reassessment of the popularity and durability of late medieval religious attitudes and perceptions, which had already begun, but which in 1992, the year of the book's first appearance, was still far from generally accepted. Three years earlier, the doyen of English Reformation studies, A. G. Dickens, had reissued and updated his classic study *The English Reformation*, which had deservedly dominated English Reformation studies for a generation. Dickens was a learned and generous-minded scholar, but in the last edition of his book, as in its first, the component elements of medieval religiosity were presented less as integrated elements in a coherent religious symbol-system than as exhibits in a freak-show. Like Erasmus, one of his intellectual heroes, Dickens looked at the framework of medieval Catholicism and saw no coherence or design, only a monstrous heap of littleness.

The first chapter of *The English Reformation* began with the words "There was once a certain knight", and went on to tell at length an elaborate and improbable medieval miracle-story of the rescue of a knight from a demon by the Virgin Mary, culled from the commonplace book of a late medieval Yorkshire cleric, Thomas Ashby. Dickens continued by itemising the rest of the contents of Ashby's book – prayer-texts to the Virgin Mary and St John of Bridlington, a commentary on the Hail Mary, assorted miracle stories, an account of the value of the opening words of St John's Gospel in Latin as a charm, an exposition of the penitential Psalm 50, a treatise on the privileges and rites of various festivals, a scholastic disputation about whether the resurrected will be naked or clothed on Judgement Day, an English rhyme teaching Transubstantiation, and so on. Dickens commented wonderingly that this material was written "not round the year 1200 but by a man who mentions Pope Julius II as still alive". In Ashby, therefore, "a twelfth-century world lingered on while Machiavelli was writing *The Prince*, while the sophisticated talkers at Urbino were giving Castiglione the materials for his *Book of the Courtier*".<sup>2</sup> This world of fable, relic, miracle and indulgence, he thought, was manifestly religiously inferior, for it allowed "the personality and teaching of Jesus to recede from the focus of the picture", and it could be demonstrated "with mathematical precision" that its connection with the Christianity of the Gospel was "rather tenuous". Medieval lay people, he thought, must have been alienated by such stuff, not least by the unscriptural horrors of purgatory, which cut them off from the mercy and love of Christ: "faced with quite terrifying

<sup>2</sup> A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, London, Fontana edn, 1974, pp. 13–16.



views of punishment in the life to come... it was small wonder that they felt more comfortable with the saints than with God.”<sup>3</sup>

As these passages suggest, Dickens's book begged many questions about the nature of late medieval piety. It never seems to have occurred to him that those who flocked and jostled to “see their Maker” at the elevation in the Mass could hardly be said to be remote from or uncomfortable with their God, or that the clergy who led prayers to the saints or commended pilgrimage, promoted also a religion focussed on their daily celebration of the Eucharist, and thus on a resolutely Christocentric action. Dickens also operated with a sharply polarized and essentially anachronistic understanding of the difference between the medieval and humanist world views: the world of Machiavelli, Castiglione, and Erasmus, on the one hand; and the wonder-world of the *Golden Legend*, indulgences, and what he more than once called the “crazed enthusiasm for pilgrimage” on the other. This distinction, singularly inapplicable to the careers and convictions of those two greatest of early Tudor English humanists, John Fisher and Thomas More, was clear and stark in Dickens's mind. Humanism, he believed, looked forward to a rational religious world in which belief was firmly based on solid biblical evidence, not on unwritten verities and ecclesiastical tradition: it stood in marked contrast to the world of “scholastic religion”, petering out in “disharmony, irrelevance and discredit”.<sup>4</sup>

Dickens's work therefore revealed the fundamentally negative assumptions which underlay much contemporary understanding of the pre-history of the English Reformation, as well as the course of that great revolution itself. Ground-breaking work by other historians, notably Jack Scarisbrick,<sup>5</sup> Christopher Harper-Bill<sup>6</sup> and (especially) Christopher Haigh,<sup>7</sup> had already by 1992 challenged this “Dickensian” account of the Reformation, not merely on its own terms, but as representative of a widely shared historiography which was culturally if not confessionally Protestant in its terms of reference. Both Haigh and Scarisbrick, however, had focused on the sixteenth century, and the immediate context of the Tudor religious revolution. The first and larger part of *The Stripping of the Altars* was an attempt to place the debate

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 444.

<sup>5</sup> J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Oxford, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> C. Harper-Bill, “Dean Colet's Convocation Sermon and the pre-Reformation Church in England”, *History* 73, 1988, pp. 191–210.

<sup>7</sup> C. Haigh (ed), *The English Reformation Revised*, Cambridge 1987; other “revisionist” works on the late medieval church offering (sometimes reluctantly) a more positive account of the early Tudor church included Peter Heath's pioneering study of the late medieval clergy: *English Parish Clergy on the Eve of the Reformation*, London, 1969, and Robert Whiting's regional study of the South-west of England: *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*, Cambridge, 1989.

about the Reformation in a longer perspective, to grapple with the evident inability of many Reformation historians to take medieval religion seriously, and to help modern readers recover a sense of the power, integrity and internal logic of that distinctive religious culture. In particular it seemed important to contest the widely shared perception that by 1500 this was a failing religion that had already alienated or lost the commitment of the more intelligent and forward-looking of its lay English audience. I sought to show that, on the contrary, medieval English Catholicism was, up to the very moment of its dissolution, a highly successful enterprise, the achievement by the official church of a quite remarkable degree of lay involvement and investment, and of a corresponding degree of doctrinal orthodoxy. To explicate that convergence of lay practice and official teaching was therefore one of my main objectives, and the focus on religion before and around 1500 was probably the book's most distinctive contribution to the wider revision of historical opinion about the period, which others had already initiated, and which in its broad outlines has since gained widespread acceptance.

### III

*The Stripping of the Altars* was received remarkably favourably by the general public: despite its bulk and its academic target audience, it escaped the confines of the academy, became a best seller (by the modest standards which pertain in such matters) and has since been through ten printings. I can still recall my own somewhat startled pleasure on glancing down a crowded London tube-carriage during the rush hour in the spring of 1993, and noticing that no fewer than four of my harassed fellow-passengers were clutching copies of the book. Perhaps more surprisingly, given its attempts to straddle two periods more commonly studied separately, it was also well received (for the most part) by both medieval and Reformation historians.<sup>8</sup>

In so far as there was consistent criticism in the book's reception, it was a sense among some reviewers that in seeking to demonstrate the internal coherence of late medieval religion, I was in danger of imposing an idealized harmony on the period, smoothing out dissent, conflict, and, in general, difference. So some commentators, while welcoming the book's detailed exposition of the practice of medieval religion, detected in it a dehistoricizing tendency, in which fifteenth-century English Christianity appeared as a calm, timeless equilibrium which minimized

<sup>8</sup> See the reviews by Peter Heath in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 January 1993, p. 4, Susan Brigden in *The London Review of Books*, 27 May 1993, p. 15, Maurice Keen in the *New York Review of Books*, 15 September 1993, pp. 50–1, and Ronald Hutton in the *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 44, October 1993, pp. 762–4.

conflict and tension, and marginalized the importance of dissent. This criticism I believe arose particularly from the absence in the book of any extended treatment of Lollardy.<sup>9</sup>

That omission, like the corresponding absence of any sustained discussion of witchcraft, was in fact a considered one, explicitly addressed in the introduction to the original edition. *The Stripping of the Altars* offered, first and foremost, an overview of the complex web of symbol, action and belief which constituted mainstream Christianity at the end of the Middle Ages. Much modern writing about the period, it seemed to me, had unwittingly distorted our perception of the place of Christianity in late medieval and early modern society by focusing disproportionately on the *outré*, the dissident and the dysfunctional. Thus studies of magic, witchcraft or of Lollardy abounded, but studies of orthodox – that is, mainstream – fifteenth-century religious practice were rarely undertaken. *The Stripping of the Altars*, nevertheless, did not argue for the *insignificance* of magic, or witchcraft, or of Lollardy. Quite simply, they were not its subject matter, and in omitting them I assumed that my book would be read alongside, not instead of, the many works which did treat of those things.

In attempting to offer a corrective to conventional assessments of medieval religion, I opted for a thematic, analytic treatment of a vast and intractable mass of source material. That decision about procedure exacted a price, similarly acknowledged in the introduction, in terms of the elimination of narrative, and the consequent muting of a sense of change and development within the thematic sections of the first and longer part of the book. I had indeed gone so far as to use the phrase “the social *homogeneity*” of late medieval religion.<sup>10</sup> By that phrase, however, I certainly did not mean to suggest that all was well in an harmonious pre-Reformation Merry England, a consensual garden of Eden only spoiled by the arrival of the serpent of reform. I recognized, as any historian with even a nodding acquaintance with the records of the medieval parish or the church courts must do, that late medieval England was a divided society, full of conflicting and diverging interests, above all the fundamental divide which runs through all human societies between the haves and have-nots, between rich and poor. And in the articulation and construction of the multiple identities which constituted that divided society, religion unquestionably had an intimate, even a dominant role – or rather, range of roles. Thus Lollard doubts and anti-sacramental polemic featured prominently in the book’s central discussion of Eucharistic belief, just as class and economic distinctions were

<sup>9</sup> A conspectus of criticisms of the *Stripping of the Altars* by medievalists can be gained from the contributions to the New Chaucer Society symposium published in *Assays: Critical Approaches to Medieval and Renaissance Texts*, vol. IX, 1996, pp. 1–56.

<sup>10</sup> Below, p. 265.

explored in discussing the social functions of the liturgy. Part I of the book thus contained a number of extended discussions of the role of late medieval religious forms and institutions in establishing or supporting the social and political pecking-order.<sup>11</sup> In speaking of the “social homogeneity” of late medieval religion, my contention was not that there were no tensions within it, but that those tensions would not be found to run directly along the lines often laid down by those seeking conventional explanations of the Reformation. The divisions of late medieval religion were subtler and more various than had commonly been suggested, and did not, for example, seem to me to run along such obvious fault-lines and divides as the distinctions between *élite* and *popular*, *clerical* and *lay*. My concern in 1992 was to contest the claim, implicit in the work of Keith Thomas,<sup>12</sup> A. G. Dickens,<sup>13</sup> Jean Delumeau<sup>14</sup> and others, that the essential differences in late medieval religion were those between the educated and ill-educated, the clerically orthodox and the superstitious populace at large. Hence, I argued, even the most apparently heterodox or bizarre magical practices might employ ritual and symbolic strategies derived directly and, all things considered, remarkably faithfully, from the liturgical paradigms of blessing and exorcism: they thus represented not magic or superstition, but lay Christianity. Hence also, people at opposite ends of the social scale, like the young Henry VIII and the Norfolk church-reeve Robert Reynes, might both own and use, in roughly the same way, charms on the names of God or the nails of the Crucifixion.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

*The Stripping of the Altars*, therefore, does not exclude or ignore difference, dissent, or doubt. But the book was written in the conviction that it was a mistake to set such dissidence and doubt at the centre of an overarching discussion of the content and character of traditional religion. I was clear, in particular, that I did not wish to devote separate treatment to the phenomenon of Lollardy, the distinctive English heresy propagated in the parishes of early Lancastrian England by the clerical disciples of the Oxford philosopher and theologian John Wycliffe.

It is, I think, worth spelling out here the rationale behind that decision

<sup>11</sup> For example, see below pp. 12–14 (social functions of the liturgy), pp. 102–7 (miracle stories and the demonization of dissent), pp. 114–16, 126–9 (power and conflict in lay experience of the Mass, and the proprietary control of the liturgy by individuals, families or social groups): pp. 164–5 (the political management of the cult of the saints).

<sup>12</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Harmondsworth, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> In his *English Reformation*.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*, London, 1977.

<sup>15</sup> Below, pp. 71–4, 295–8, plates 110, 112.

about procedure. Wycliffe has often been accorded the pious and honorific title “morning star of the Reformation”, and historians have conventionally credited much of the early success of the Reformation to expectations and attitudes planted by a continuing tradition of Lollardy in early Tudor England.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, I believe that the impact of Lollardy on fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century religious awareness has been grossly exaggerated. The mainstream of fifteenth-century piety was indeed conventionally censorious of heresy, but not in my view greatly affected, much less shaped, by reaction to it, while the overwhelming majority of early Protestant activists were converts from devout Catholicism, not from Lollardy.<sup>17</sup>

When I devised a title for *The Stripping of the Altars* I adopted, for convenience sake, a starting date of “c. 1400”. In fact, the real focus of the medieval section of the book falls, as more than one reviewer commented, predominantly on the second half of the fifteenth century. Unfortunately, the date 1400, even with its softening “circa”, led some readers to expect that I would deal with the crisis of Lollardy from the enactment of the notorious act authorising the burning of heretics, *De heretico Comburendo*, in 1401, through Arundel’s *Constitutions* of 1409, to the fiasco of Oldcastle’s riot (it scarcely merits the name rebellion) in 1414. Professor David Aers, in what was certainly the most ferocious response to the book, insisted that I had occluded the complexity and contested nature of fifteenth-century Christianity in England by writing Lollardy out of the picture.<sup>18</sup> Professor Aers pointed to the structural contrast between the thematic arrangement of the first part of the book, and the narrative arrangement of the first four chapters of the second part. That Reformation narrative, he argued, offered an account of the violent impact of royal power on Tudor religion as the novel intrusion of a usurping secular force into the timeless tranquilities of late medieval religion. On the contrary, he claimed, there was nothing new about such violence. The long history of the suppression of Lollardy by the alliance of the Church and Crown meant that royal enforcement was central to the character and history of late medieval as well as Reformation religion. By the time of Henry VIII, he argued “nothing could have seemed more ‘traditional’ than the role of the sovereign or secular authorities in the determination of what forms of Christianity should be enforced and what forms criminalised.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a recent example, alleging the fusion of Norfolk Lollardy with the new Evangelical movement to create “a vigorous popular Protestantism” see A. Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, fifth edn, London, 2004, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> A point robustly made in Richard Rex, *The Lollards*, London, 2002, ch. 5.

<sup>18</sup> David Aers, “Altars of Power: Reflections on Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*,” *Literature and History* 3, 1994, 90–105.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 97.



This insistence on the equivalence of the role of the Crown in fifteenth- and in sixteenth-century England, however, seems to me misconceived, because based on an implicit counter-narrative to that offered in *The Stripping of the Altars*. In this counter-narrative Lollardy is presented as a major rival to orthodox Catholicism, needing sustained persecution and counter-propaganda to contain it, and hence functioning as a major determinant of official religious policy. In such an account, the character of fifteenth-century Catholicism had to be maintained by brute force, in a way directly comparable to the force exercised in pursuit of revolutionary religious change by successive Tudor regimes. Aers saw in the book's portrayal of late medieval religion as consensual and essentially unchallenged a deliberate and collusive act of injustice, writing out of the history of late medieval religion the victims of church and state brutality, the "ruthless exclusion of the already excluded 'others'."

The counter-narrative undergirding Professor Aers's criticism, and the over-estimation implicit in it of the role of Lollardy and of anti-Lollard state violence as determinants of the shape of late medieval English Christianity, however, seem to me simply mistaken. In imposing Protestantism the Tudor monarchy was manifestly working *against* the grain of popular religious sentiment and culture, in a way which the early Lancastrian monarchy manifestly was not. The bulldozing away of the externals of medieval Catholicism in Edward's reign in particular destroyed or defaced generations of lay donation to the parish churches, and finally and decisively halted lay investment in a form of religious conspicuous consumption which had been booming into the 1530s.<sup>20</sup> The Lancastrian campaign against heresy, by contrast, sought dynastic legitimacy by aligning itself with an orthodoxy which the regime knew had in fact overwhelming popular support – that, indeed, was the whole point of the alignment. There is thus no equivalence or symmetry between Crown intervention in the two cases.

In assessing the character of English religion in the century after Chaucer it is, in any case, highly misleading to place too much weight on Lollardy as a cultural determinant. Lollards of course continued to surface in ecclesiastical court proceedings after 1430, and there were to remain significant concentrations of them in Wealden Kent, Berkshire (above all in the Chiltern Hills round Amersham), and in a handful of urban enclaves such as Coventry.<sup>21</sup> Yet if we are to believe the surviving

<sup>20</sup> A sense of the scale and lavishness of this investment in Early Tudor England can be gained from Richard Marks and Paul Williamson (eds), *Gothic, Art for England 1400–1547*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> J. A. F. Thompson, *The Later Lollards, 1414–1525*, Oxford, 1965.

visitation and court records, fifteenth-century Lollardy seems to have been less of an irritant to most diocesan authorities than local cunning-men or womanising priests, and there is no convincing evidence that it served as *the* shaping factor in any of the major developments of late medieval English piety. Even in its acknowledged strongholds, it is hard to be certain of the real extent of its popular base, and the leading authority on the religion of fifteenth-century Bristol has recently argued that the city's reputation as a hot-bed of heresy in the late Middle Ages is the product of skewed documentation, largely an illusion.<sup>22</sup> Certainly even at the height of the struggle against Lollardy, in the decades on either side of 1400, it is possible to exaggerate its cultural and political impact. Paul Strohm's delvings into the language and mindset of Ricardian and Lancastrian England have alerted us to the political and dynastic resonances of the anti-Lollard campaign.<sup>23</sup> The new Lancastrian dynasty did indeed ostentatiously embrace and enforce religious orthodoxy as a means of legitimating its dubious dynastic claims, and of cementing the allegiances of powerful churchmen. All the same, it is worth noting that under Henry IV more Franciscan friars were executed for preaching against Lancastrian dynastic usurpation than Lollards were burned for heresy.<sup>24</sup>

The character of the popular appeal of early Lollardy – but perhaps also its evanescence – is vividly suggested by the hold it established in Leicester in the 1380s. The movement there was centred on the disused leper hospital of St John the Baptist, just outside the city, converted into a hermitage by a local layman, William Smith, who was joined by a chantry-chaplain named Richard Waytestaythe, and by the hermit-priest William Swinderby, a protégé of Philip Repingdon's.<sup>25</sup> These men must have looked familiar to the citizenry of Leicester, standing in a tradition of devotional reform that went back to Richard Rolle and beyond. Rolle's first entry into the life of a hermit is worth recalling here. Dressed in a bizarre costume improvised from two of his sister's kirtles and an old rainhood of his father's, he appeared unannounced in the Dalton family chapel in the parish church of Pickering one summer day in 1318. John Dalton was bailiff of Pickering, keeper of the forest and constable of the castle, a considerable man. Rolle's father had probably been in his service, and Rolle himself had known Dalton's sons at Oxford. Though Rolle was a layman, the parish priest permitted him to preach an English sermon, and the Daltons were sufficiently impressed

<sup>22</sup> Clive Burgess, "A Hotbed of heresy? Fifteenth-century Bristol and Lollardy reconsidered," in Linda Clerk (ed), *The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion*, Woodbridge, 2003, pp 43–62.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399–1422*, New Haven and London, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> An observation I owe to my colleague Dr Richard Rex.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, Oxford, 1988, p. 74 ff.

to take him into their house, and to clothe him formally as a hermit.<sup>26</sup> The whole incident suggests a religious culture hospitable to the extraordinary, and not by any means slavishly subordinated to clerical control: Rolle does not seem to have had or indeed to have sought official approval for his adoption of the eremitical life. Lollardy undoubtedly brought a new and dangerous edge to this sort of charismatic religious culture, but the welcome it received must in many cases have built on this non-heretical tradition of lay devotional independence.

Swinderby, who famously preached to large crowds from a pulpit improvised round mill-stones displayed for sale outside the Leper Chapel, did eventually preach unmistakably Wycliffite teachings, such as the rejection of Transubstantiation, but that was after he had left Leicester. To judge by the propositions he was forced to repudiate by Bishop Buckingham, his Leicester preaching seems to have consisted of issues which would have resonated with many non-Wycliffite critics – which means *members* – of the contemporary church, in particular the injustices of tithe and the defectiveness of the ministrations of unworthy priests. Waytestaythe and Smith anticipated what was to become the familiar Lollard polemic and polemical style against the cult of images, denouncing the shrine images of the Virgin of Walsingham and of the mother church of the diocese at Lincoln as “witches”, and giving a practical demonstration of the powerlessness of holy images by cooking a cabbage over the broken fragments of a statue of St Catherine. Anne Hudson considers that this polemic against images was particularly popular with the laity of Leicester, though it should be noted that the chronicler Knighton, our principle source, seems to imply exactly the opposite, noting that “so, banishing shame they did not bother to conceal the deed, but boasted about it in jest. But they did not go unpunished, for many heard of it, and not long afterwards they were expelled from the chapel”.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, this cocktail of anti-clerical, anti-sacramental, and anti-symbolic teaching does seem to have attracted support in the town, including that of the mayor and some of the town council. Ten years on, there would be a similar body of support among the urban *élite* of Northampton, where the principal Lollard leader was another hermit, this time a woman, the piquantly named Anna Palmer [i.e. pilgrim], ancess of St Peter’s Church.<sup>28</sup>

Just how extensive long-term lay support for Lollardy was, how wide its social spread, and how enduring its appeal in communities where it

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Hughes, “Rolle, Richard (1305–1349),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, Oxford, 2004; Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in late Medieval Yorkshire*, Woodbridge, 1988, pp. 82–126.

<sup>27</sup> Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 76; G. H. Martin (ed.), *Knighton’s Chronicle 1337–1396*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 296–7.

<sup>28</sup> Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.



had once taken root would be hard to say. By the time Margery Kempe arrived in Leicester in 1414, overt support for religious deviance among the ruling elite had evidently evaporated, and she was denounced by the Mayor as a “fals strumpet, a fals Loller and a fals deceyver of the pepyl”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed the meaning of the term “Lollard” itself was at this early stage far from fixed. For Chaucer it was something joylessly akin to the later term “Puritan”, for Langland something more complicated, and recognisably related to the sort of phenomenon we have seen at Leicester – “such manere hermytes/ Lollen ayen the byleyve and maner of holy chyrche”.<sup>30</sup> Lollardy must often have seemed to some of its early supporters not much more than the left wing of a generally “reformist” piety, which emphasised the value of vernacular religious texts, the dangers of a sterile or hypocritical ritualism, and the evils of a worldly clergy. Devotional compendia like the *Pore Caitiff* of c. 1400 notoriously shared much of the same reformist platform as Lollard writings and preaching, and drew on similar materials, yet remained nevertheless entirely orthodox. The characteristics of the “Lollard Wills” identified by K. B. MacFarlane as the unifying mark of Wycliffite gentry – a loathing of the physical body and an insistence of simple burial characterised by alms to the poor in place of funeral pomp – are, as is well known, replicated in the wills of testators of impeccable orthodoxy, not least those of Archbishop Arundel and of the renegade ex-Lollard Philip Repingdon, Bishop of Lincoln. Repingdon, indeed, in common with several of the other “lost leaders” among the apostles of early Wycliffism, was to prove himself a determined opponent of his former associates.<sup>31</sup> Denied the oxygen of educated clergy leadership and of gentry protection, Lollardy declined inexorably into negativity, a form of rejection of the dominant sacramental and symbolic expressions of contemporary Christianity. From about 1430 in most places it was almost certainly in recession, and no new texts were produced to nourish it.

## V

The positive religious attraction of Lollardy is in any case elusive. It must certainly have centred on its Biblicism, the draw of the vernacular scriptures, an attraction which certainly extended far beyond the bounds of the heretical movement itself. The domestic reading or recitation of biblical material emerges from all our sources as the single most constant and sustaining feature of Lollard communities. The favoured

<sup>29</sup> Barry Windeatt (ed), *The Book of Margery Kempe*, London, 2000, p. 229.

<sup>30</sup> On Langland and Lollardy, Hudson, *op. cit.*, pp. 398–408.

<sup>31</sup> J. A. F. Thompson, “Knightly Piety and the Margins of Lollardy,” in Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages*, Stroud, 1997, pp. 95–111.

material was often didactic (the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Epistle of St James) or apocalyptic (The Book of Revelation), helping to nourish a sense of a lay religion based round moral action independent of clerical ceremonial, or to fuel an urgent and angry sense that the official church had gone disastrously astray. But the appeal of vernacular scripture was clearly a powerful one in an increasingly literate lay population. The ban imposed in 1409 was therefore pregnant with consequence for the future, leaving unsatisfied a need attested by the fact that many and perhaps most fifteenth-century owners and readers of Wycliffite bibles were impeccably orthodox Catholics, like the Suffolk wool magnate John Clopton of Long Melford. Clopton built himself a tomb in the chancel of the parish church which doubled as the Easter Sepulchre for the adoration of the reserved Sacrament at Easter, so he was clearly no Lollard: yet his will made careful arrangements for the bestowal of his English bible, just as it did for his collection of relics and his gold pectoral cross.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Lollardy shared with the Franciscan movement it so much detested a powerful critique of the extravagant excess of much contemporary ritual provision, and the consequent neglect of the poor. Many sensitive late medieval Christians may have suspected that gold lavished on statues would be better spent feeding and clothing the hungry and naked, that the real image of Christ was not so much the carved crucifix as the flesh of suffering humanity. Hence Lollard insistence that “it wer better to give a poor bitynel or lame man a peny than to bestow their mony in pilgre goyng and worshipping the immagys of sentys, for man is the very ymage of godde which ought only to be wurshipd and no stokkys ne stonys”,<sup>33</sup> went unerringly to one of the nerve-centres of medieval Christianity. More positively expressed, that perception is the main substance of many of the stories in the Franciscan *Fioretti*, and something like it seems implicit in the eloquent gesture of the Norfolk Lollard Margery Baxter, when she rebuked her neighbour Joan Clifland for lavishing attention on images made by “lewed wrightes of stokkes”, and instead stretched out her arms cross-wise, saying “Look, here is the true cross of Christ, which you can and you should venerate every day in your own home”.<sup>34</sup> In some cases at least that insight appears to have been translated into practice. Derek Plumb has demonstrated the relatively wide social distribution of Lollardy in the Chilterns, and has discerned in the wills of the Lollards and ex-Lollards there a greater concern for the relief of the poor than is apparent in the

<sup>32</sup> J. Jackson Howard (ed), *The Visitation of Suffolk*, Lowestoft and London, 1866, I, p. 38; Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480–1642*, London, 2003, p. 17.

<sup>33</sup> Isabel Dorte of East Hendred in Berkshire, 1491, quoted in Diana Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England*, London, 2000, p. 233.

<sup>34</sup> Norman Tanner (ed), *Norwich Heresy Trials*, London, 1977, p. 44.

wills of their orthodox neighbours.<sup>35</sup> Lollardy appealed also to a desire for simplicity which must often have been felt amidst the lavishness of late medieval Catholicism. Many laymen would have approved the Lollard sentiment that “a simple Pater noster of a ploughman that is in charity is better than a thousand masses of covetous prelates and vain religious full of covetousness and pride and false flattering and nourishing of sin”: the same sentiments would not have been out of place in the *sermone volgare* of Bernardino of Siena.<sup>36</sup>

But in Lollardy that perception characteristically seems to have articulated itself less in the formulation of a positive religious code than in the disparagement of the sins of others, and you cannot build a healthy religious life on the disparagement of your neighbours, even your clerical neighbours. For all its biblicism, Lollardy presented itself primarily as a critique of religion rather than an alternative religion, and after 1414 it seems to have displayed an unstoppable tendency to slide into the ideology of the village know-all. The hostile court records which are our principal sources admittedly bristle with obvious difficulties as an accurate or adequate picture of a clandestine religious tradition. Yet what they reveal to us seems essentially a family tradition with little apparent evangelical appeal or motivation. This may have been because the popular movement had little constructive religious content, drawing its vigour apparently from its deconstruction of alternative forms of religiosity, its character (often memorably) preserved in ale-house belly-laughs at the expense of “Our Lady of Foulpit” or “Our Lady of Falsingham”, rather than in any more positive folk wisdom.

But the same seems to me true of Wycliffism even at its most sophisticated. The Wycliffite Sermon Cycle is the largest and most systematic body of Lollard teaching, a stupendous and learned labour providing 294 sermons for the whole year, produced in Oxford or in some aristocratic Lollard household in the last years of the fourteenth century.<sup>37</sup> It is a chilling and depressing body of material, all too obviously infected by the spiritual dyspepsia of the movement’s founder, monotonous in its moralism and its relentless polemic against the religious orders and the “folly of prelates”, entirely lacking in the affective warmth and devotion to the suffering humanity of Christ which is the distinctive mark of late medieval popular Christianity. It is hard to imagine this sour diet satisfying anyone’s religious hunger for long.

I am suggesting that there was something religiously – by which I suppose I mean imaginatively – sterile about Lollardy. To put the matter

<sup>35</sup> Derek Plumb, “The social and economic spread of rural Lollardy,” in W. J. Sheils and D. Wood (eds), *Voluntary Religion: Studies in Church History*, vol. 23, Oxford, 1986, pp. 111–29; see also his even more emphatic essays in M. Spufford (ed), *The World of the Rural Dissenters 1520–1725*, Cambridge, 1995, chs 2 and 3.

<sup>36</sup> Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

in less value-laden terms, there was in Lollardy at the very least a literalistic hostility to symbol and metaphor which put it at odds with some of the most characteristic energies of late medieval Christianity, and which, for all their overlaps of interest and emphasis, contrasts with Langland, who shared many of the concerns of Wycliffe and his disciples, yet whose poem is in the end so very un-Lollard a document. Like the Lollard preachers, Langland had no interest in and no sympathy for the affective tradition of meditation on the Passion which was the dominant devotional mode of the late Middle Ages. But Peter Dronke and others have commented on the extraordinary fluidity and fusion of Langland's use of symbol and metaphor, the symbolic complexity and creative instability of his poetic method, the roots of which Dronke found in the mystical tradition.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Kantik Ghosh has demonstrated Wycliffe's extreme unease with the ambiguities of symbol, metaphor and even parable, his "obsessive interest in justifying the domain of figurative language by pointing to 'real' and not merely 'perceived' correspondence between vehicle and tenor", and his "extraordinary reluctance to admit that spiritual truths can be communicated by means of 'fictions'."<sup>39</sup> As in the Master, so in the disciples, and the same suspicion of fiction is evident in Lollard polemic against "Myracles Playing". It was the Wycliffite refusal or incomprehension of this polysemic resourcefulness of late medieval religion, as much as royal or episcopal persecution, which made it marginal to the course of mainstream religion in England in the later fifteenth century.

## VI

*The Stripping of the Altars* is, as some commentators quite rightly saw, essentially a book about religion in the century from about 1450 onwards,<sup>40</sup> the "c. 1400" of the subtitle being adopted to acknowledge the fact that I had drawn on some earlier texts – principally the *Book of Margery Kempe*. It may be, as Miri Rubin has suggested,<sup>41</sup> that the harmonies of traditional religion as I portray them can be understood as the strenuous mid-century outcome of a prolonged earlier struggle with, and process of enforcement of orthodoxy upon, the Lollards. I should myself, however, be reluctant to concede even this much. It has been argued by Professor Nicholas Watson that the condemnation of Lollardy by Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* in 1409 effectively

<sup>37</sup> Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon (eds), *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 5 vols, Oxford 1983–96.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Dronke, "Arbor Caritas," in P. L. Heyworth (ed), *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 207–43.

<sup>39</sup> Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy*, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 32, 34.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Miri Rubin, in *Assays ix* (note 8 above), p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

sterilised English vernacular religious writing for the rest of the century. After the intellectual daring of Ricardian writing – Langland, Chaucer, Julian of Norwich, and lesser writers, Watson argued – we get the dumbed-down flatness of Lydgate and Gower, and the unquestioning devotionism of Nicholas Love. After 1409, he considers, no-one dared *think* about religion in English, and the use of the vernacular for religious purposes in itself became suspect and problematic. In this general argument, the mid-century trial and condemnation for heresy of Bishop Reginald Pecock, whose many controversial works against the Lollards are written in English, has been seen as a key piece of evidence, it being contended – or at times assumed – that Pecock fell foul of the general ban on the vernacular which flowed from Arundel's *Constitutions*.<sup>42</sup>

But there just isn't enough evidence to claim so much. It has been recently demonstrated that Pecock's use of the vernacular was never central to the case against him. He was condemned not for writing in English, but for an exaltation of human reason which threatened the authority of scripture in matters of faith. Pecock had certainly crossed the boundaries of fifteenth-century orthodoxy, but because of what he said, not because of the language in which he said it. Moreover, his fall was almost certainly orchestrated by political enemies, and should not be understood as the inevitable outcome of some supposed general hyper-vigilant orthodoxy, fuelled by panic about Lollardy.<sup>43</sup> I myself doubt that Lollardy had a sufficiently deep or wide hold over the laity as a whole to justify a rereading of the remarkable catechetical and devotional achievement of the fifteenth-century church, simply or primarily in terms of its response to heresy.

There certainly were fifteenth-century devotional texts, like Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Life of Jesu*, with its anti-Lollard appendix on the Blessed Sacrament,<sup>44</sup> which register for us the alarmed orthodox response to vernacular heresy. The life-work of Bishop Pecock was itself based on a continuing preoccupation with the Lollard threat and the need for a response in kind. But Pecock's writings were themselves evidence of considerable theological experiment, and the impact of Arundel's *Constitutions*, which have been described as initiating "a regulatory frenzy [which] changed the whole texture of religious culture in England"<sup>45</sup> should not be exaggerated. Fifteenth-

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval Vernacular Theology," *Speculum* 70, 1995, pp. 822–64.

<sup>43</sup> In the unpublished 2003 Cambridge PhD dissertation by Sarah James, "Debating Heresy: 15th-century Vernacular Theology and Arundel's *Constitutions*".

<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ, a Reading Text*, ed. Michael G. Sargent, Exeter, 2004, pp. 223–39, esp. pp. 235–7.

<sup>45</sup> By Steven Justice in D. Wallace (ed), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, Cambridge, 1999, p. 676.



century England simply did not possess the resources or infrastructure needed for a theocratic police-state, and the *Constitutions* were never consistently or systematically enforced. Orthodox attitudes to vernacular religious writing after 1409 were far from uniformly hostile. Even the gargantuan Latin anti-Lollard treatise of the Carmelite theologian Thomas Netter, the *Doctrinale Fidei Catholicae*, was probably already essentially otiose by the time of its early circulation in the 1420s, for Wycliffism by that date was in retreat in its Oxford stronghold. Netter's book was probably compiled at least as much with an eye to re-establishing the orthodox credentials of the English church with the papacy and Continental churchmen alienated by Wycliffe's reputation as an heresiarch during the anti-heretical proceedings of the Council of Constance, as to any English audience.<sup>46</sup> The fight against Lollardy would continue to provide a motive for the foundation of colleges and the provision of preachers, but the vernacular teaching of the faith in the remainder of the fifteenth century seems relatively and curiously untouched by anti-Lollard themes. Even at the height of the Lollard crisis, a London-based poet like the author of the alliterative verse narrative *St Erkenwald* was able to treat sacramental themes in terms which harked back to the theological preoccupations of the early fourteenth century, without any hint of overt engagement with or embarrassment by the teachings of Wycliffe.<sup>47</sup> And by the mid-fifteenth century, so apparently promising a platform for anti-Lollard polemic as the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, probably written in Suffolk, contains no obvious connections or allusions to contemporary heresy.<sup>48</sup> The anti-sacramentalists of the play are Jews, not Lollards, and there is not even the most oblique reference in the play to any continuing tradition of East Anglian heresy. If Lollardy provided an extra spur to the late medieval church's catechetical activity, it did not fundamentally alter the nature of the exercise. Indeed, the Lollard tradition itself seems to have been confined to a cluster of dynastically dominated and perpetuated Lollard communities. Despite the continuing insistence by some historians on the deep-rooted persistence of Lollardy as a feature of fifteenth-century religion, and even when all due allowance is made for the accidents of the survival of documentation, there is surprisingly little hard evidence of *widespread* popular appeal. Though there were periodic revivals of Episcopal concern about the Lollard threat, like that at Coventry in the 1480s, pastoral preoccupation in the fifteenth cen-

<sup>46</sup> For Netter and his work, Hudson, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–5.

<sup>47</sup> E. Duffy, "St Erkenwald: London's Cathedral Saint," in J. Backhouse (ed), *The Medieval English Cathedral, Papers in Honour of Pamela Tudor-Craig*, Donington, 2003, pp. 150–67.

<sup>48</sup> N. Davis (ed), *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, Oxford, 1970, pp. 58–89.

tury seems by and large very much more concerned with ignorance than with heresy.<sup>49</sup>

This difficulty in attributing a decisive role to Lollardy in the formation of later fifteenth-century orthodoxy was highlighted by the publication in 1994 of Professor Ann Nichols's superb study of the carved Seven-Sacrament fonts of East Anglia, *Seeable Signs*.<sup>50</sup> Professor Nichols's book demonstrated that these extraordinary ritual objects, (forty-two survive) unlike many comparable continental depictions of the sacraments, precisely and remarkably embodied the best fifteenth-century academic teaching about the form and matter of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. She went on to suggest that this iconographical precision had perhaps been elicited by the Lollard threat. She pointed out that the fonts were to be found in the same region – and sometimes in the same places – as earlier manifestations of Lollardy, and that they should perhaps therefore be read as direct responses to Lollardy.

Tempting as such an interpretation might be, however, the problem is that the geographical overlap on which it rests was in fact only very approximate. Moreover, in the West Country, where Lollardy made little or no impact, equally striking and orthodox Seven-Sacrament artifacts – in this case stained-glass windows depicting the sacraments – had also proliferated in the fifteenth century. Above all, there is in every case at least a two-generation gap between the last recorded incidence of Lollardy, and the commissioning of the East Anglian fonts. The classic instance here is perhaps Martham, the hometown of the notorious Lollard Margery Baxter, and a parish which possesses a fine Seven-Sacrament font dating from the 1470s. Margery Baxter had made a special point of denouncing infant baptism,<sup>51</sup> so it is tempting to see the Martham font as a rebuttal, maybe by the wealthy of the parish, of her lower-class heresies. But fifty years is a long time to ponder such a rebuttal, and there is no independent evidence of continuing heterodoxy in the Martham region to explain the timing of such a gesture in the 1470s. Concern over Lollardy probably did form part of the prehistory of such artifacts, just as heresy in general was one contributory cause among others of the heightened concern for theological correctness which is so striking a feature of late medieval religious culture (notably in France and the Low Countries). Such concern, however, hardly constitutes evidence of a continuing panic about heresy, but rather the

<sup>49</sup> Coventry Lollardy has now been magnificently documented in Shannon McSheffrey and Norman Tanner, *Lollards of Coventry, 1486–1522*, Camden Society, 5th Series, vol. 23, Cambridge, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Nichols, *Seeable Signs, the Iconography of the Seven Sacraments 1350–1544*, Woodbridge, 1994.

<sup>51</sup> Norman P. Tanner (ed), *Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich 1428–31*, Camden Society, 4th Series, vol. 20, Cambridge, 1977.

pearly precipitation of heightened orthodoxy round an ancient piece of heretical grit, which in most places had long since ceased to irritate directly. And to concede even so much for fifteenth-century England may be to falsify, for a preoccupation with catechetical precision is a feature of fifteenth-century religion in Western Europe as a whole, as the growing popularity of decorative schemes involving the iconography of those symbols of the teaching authority of the hierarchy, the Four Latin Doctors, suggests.<sup>52</sup>

## VII

The interpretation of the English Reformation offered in this book looks less contentious now than it did in 1992.<sup>53</sup> Even the least enthusiastic reviewers then agreed that the book had “amply proved” that the late medieval church was “a flourishing and popular institution”, and that the shift to Protestantism “was at first the work of a small minority”.<sup>54</sup> In an England rapidly shedding, and indeed sometimes sadly embarrassed by, its own patriotic Protestant foundation-myth, the book’s main contentions have since been quietly absorbed into public perception. It has become an historical commonplace that in the course of the three generations from 1530 to the end of Elizabeth’s reign “one of the most Catholic of European countries” became “one of the most anti-Catholic”.<sup>55</sup> I doubt myself whether England’s Catholicism was in fact all that strikingly different in intensity from that of its northern-European neighbours, but however that may be, this acceptance of the book’s main contentions is perhaps clearest in recent thinking about the visual arts and material culture in medieval and Tudor England, and more widely in Europe. *The Stripping of the Altars* was thus one of the shaping influences behind the National Gallery’s hugely successful millennium exhibition, *Seeing Salvation*,<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> F. E. Hutchinson, *Medieval Glass at All Souls College*, London, 1949, pp. 38, 43, 49 and plates xxviii and xxix; Hilary Wayment, *King’s College Chapel Cambridge: the Side-Chapel Glass*, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 194–5, illustrated p. 196; G. McN. Rushforth, *Medieval Christian Imagery as illustrated by the painted windows of Great Malvern Priory Church*, Oxford, 1936, pp. 253–4, 316–20; Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France: the Late Middle Ages*, Princeton, 1986, pp. 212–13 and plates 122–3; Henk Van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the late Middle Ages in Europe 1300–1500*, Amsterdam, 1994, pp. 118–22; J. Leclercq, in F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq (eds), *Dictionnaire d’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, 1920, iv (i) cols 1260–1 (“Docteurs de l’Eglise”); Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance*, Baltimore, 1988, pp. 89–90.

<sup>53</sup> Two outstanding recent surveys of the English Reformation provide an overview of the current state of research: Felicity Heal’s *Reformation in Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, 2003, as its title suggests, offers a unique “three kingdoms” perspective, while Peter Marshall’s briefer *Reformation England 1480–1642*, London, 2003, is specially strong in its judicious appraisal of the historiography.

<sup>54</sup> Professor Lawrence Stone, in *The Guardian*, Tuesday 26 January 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation*, London, 2003, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> Catalogued in Gabriele Finaldi (ed), *The Image of Christ*, London, National Gallery, 2000.



and the Victoria and Albert Museum's 2003 exhibition *Gothic, Art for England*.<sup>57</sup>

In historical writing, however, we are now in a self-consciously "post-revisionist" era. Recent treatments of the Reformation, while taking the main contentions of this book, and similar positions in the work of Haigh, Scarisbrick, and others as essentially proven, group them together under the blanket term "revisionism", and seek ways, some more successful than others, of moving beyond the terms of the debate about the English Reformation laid down in those works. As one such self-consciously "post-revisionist" historian has written, "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" – before proceeding, nevertheless, to argue for the radical unsatisfactoriness of "the revisionist model" of the history of the Reformation.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, this "revisionist model" is largely a critical construct, for the differences between "revisionists" are at least as significant as their agreements. It is, for example, a fundamental contention of *The Stripping of the Altars* that the Reformation represented a deep and traumatic cultural hiatus; it is a fundamental contention of Christopher Haigh's masterly and mischievous *English Reformations*, published in 1993, by contrast, that when the dust had settled on all the Crown-imposed religious upheavals, nothing very much had in fact happened.<sup>59</sup> But at least almost everyone now agrees that "although there were some English people excited about Protestantism in Henry VIII's reign, there was not much popular support for a change", despite which "over the course of three generations the way the English worshipped...and related to their place in the universe underwent a sea change".<sup>60</sup>

Historical enquiry into the English Reformation has therefore shifted now from consideration of the reluctances and resistances to reformation which "revisionism" highlighted, to the *processes* by which in the course of those three generations the assimilation of Protestant practice and belief took place. In that sense, my own study, published in 2001, of the conservative Devon village of Morebath, and its priest Sir Christopher Trychay, from the 1520s to the 1570s, is a "post-revisionist" work.<sup>61</sup> It is "post-revisionist" also in its correction of some of the

<sup>57</sup> Richard Marks and Paul Williamson, *Gothic: Art for England 1400–1547*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 2003.

<sup>58</sup> Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> For a generalising discussion which tends to conflate several varieties of "revisionism" as a unitary phenomenon, see the Introduction to N. Tyack (ed), *England's Long Reformation 1500–1800*, London, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> Norman Jones, *The English Reformation: Religion and Cultural Adaptation*, London 2002, p. 2.

<sup>61</sup> E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, New Haven and London, 2001.

emphases of *The Stripping of the Altars*. Writing about Morebath in 1992, I had fully grasped neither the fact nor the implications of the remarkable promptitude and punctiliousness of Morebath's conformity with successive phases of the Henrician and early Edwardine Reformations (Morebath acquired an English bible, for example, before many of the urban parishes of Exeter), nor the extent of their conservative loathing of reform.<sup>62</sup> In 1549, it is now apparent, the formerly docilely acquiescent Morebath, bankrupted by the crippling financial demands of the Reformation, and demoralized by the collapse of vital social institutions structured round the cult of the saints, had armed and financed five unmarried men, and sent them to off join the traditionalist rebels besieging Exeter in protest against the Reformation and the Book of Common Prayer. Both Morebath's conformity and its eventual rebellion throw light on what has been called "the compliance conundrum",<sup>63</sup> which "revisionist" accounts of the Reformation like *The Stripping of the Altars* posed in a specially acute form. If early and mid-Tudor England was so Catholic, why and how was the Reformation accepted? But on that complex question, the jury is still out.

If the treatment of Morebath in this book needs some fine-tuning, by and large the Reformation section of *The Stripping of the Altars* seems to me to have worn surprisingly well, provided it is borne in mind that what is offered here is not a general history of the coming of Protestantism, but an account of its impact on the conservative majority. In retrospect, the chapter on Mary seems the most original in the second part of the book. Negative perceptions of the church under "Bloody Mary" have rather unsurprisingly proved the most resilient aspect of the traditional Protestant understanding of the Reformation. The section on the Marian church in a recent widely used survey of the Reformation is headed, characteristically, "Mary: Reaction and Persecution".<sup>64</sup> Persecution is certainly a major part of the story of Marian Catholicism,<sup>65</sup> but recognition of its horrors, and (rather less certainly) its counter-productivity, should not blind us to the more positive religious achievements of the Marian regime. Historians still regularly comment on the "limited intellectual horizons" of Marian

<sup>62</sup> For the evolution of my own understanding of the significance of Morebath's experience of Reformation, compare the book cited in the previous note with E. Duffy, "Morebath 1520–1570: a Rural Parish in the Reformation," in J. Devlin and R. Fanning (eds), *Religion and Rebellion*, Dublin, 1997, pp. 17–39.

<sup>63</sup> The phrase is Christopher Marsh's, in *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England*, London, 1998, pp. 197 ff.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Parish in A. Pettegree (ed), *The Reformation World*, London, 2000, p. 229.

<sup>65</sup> For a survey of the Marian persecution of Protestants, see my "The repression of heresy in England," in Agostino Borromeo (ed), *L'Inquisizione, Atti del Simposio internazionale, Città del Vaticano, 29–31 Ottobre 1998*, Vatican 2003, pp. 445–68.

Catholicism.<sup>66</sup> By contrast, I would want now to emphasize and extend my insistence in this book on the Counter-Reformation character of Marian Catholicism. In particular, I would now argue even more strongly than I did in 1992 for the Marian regime's alertness to the power of popular religious culture, and its ability to harness and direct it.

One instance must suffice here: the creation by Cardinal Pole's Legatine Synod in 1555 of an annual commemoration on St Andrew's Day (30 November) of the restoration of papal obedience, at which a sermon was to be preached on papal primacy in every parish in the land, and before which there was to be a parish procession with banners. Pole thereby initiated a propagandist device, the public anniversary religious celebration, which is normally thought of as a characteristically *Protestant* institution, and which would indeed be exploited as a key element in the later formation of a Protestant popular culture, most notably in commemorations of Queen Elizabeth's Accession day on 17 November, and, in the seventeenth century, of Gunpowder, Treason and Plot on 5 November.<sup>67</sup>

## VIII

Because my concern in chapters eleven to fifteen of the book was with the impact of Protestantism on the religion of the majority, the Reformation features here as an essentially destructive force, a movement for which, as I claimed in a consciously hyperbolic phrase, "iconoclasm was the central sacrament".<sup>68</sup> So, finally, it is worth stressing here that I do of course recognize that Tudor Protestantism was far more than the mere refusal of Catholicism, and that, in contrast to Lollardy, the Reformation had a positive and powerful message, which might and did inspire large numbers of devout men and women. Unlike Lollardy, Protestantism was both an expansive and a potent evangelizing movement. Indeed the very act of iconoclasm might make the force and nature of that positive vision clear. In the people's portion of the shared parish and monastic church of Binham priory in North Norfolk there survive the remains of an early Tudor rood-screen, the lower part or dado of which was painted in the usual manner with rows of holy

<sup>66</sup> A. Pettegree, "A. G. Dickens, his critics, and the English Reformation," *Historical Research*, vol. 77, February 2004, p. 58.

<sup>67</sup> David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells. National Memory and the protestant calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England*, Berkeley, 1989. I have dealt with this aspect of the Marian regime's religious policy more fully in "Cardinal Pole preaching: St Andrew's day 1557," in Eamon Duffy and David Loades (eds), *The Church of Mary Tudor*, Aldershot, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Below, p. 480.

figures, Christ and his saints and angels. In Edward's reign the screen was purged of the carved crucifix which surmounted it, and the lower panels, with their rows of painted saints, were whitewashed over. On the blank surface thus secured, handsome black letter passages were copied from the First Epistle of St Peter and the Epistles of St Paul. The text used was that of Cranmer's Great Bible, the 'Bible of the largest volume' commanded to be set up in churches by the 1538 Injunctions. The passages selected replaced the screen's former representation of the saints as intercessors, healers and protectors, with a scriptural message of inner sanctity, in which the reader is urged to unity, charity, and holiness of life. So, one of the panels reads, in the words of Colossians chapter 3 verses 12–15.

[Wherefore as electe of God,] Holy and beloved, put on tender mercye, kyndnes, humblenes of mynde, mekenes, longe suffringe, forbearynge one another, yf any man have a quarrell agaynst another: as Christ forgave you, even so do ye. Above all these thinges put on love, which is the bonde of perfectnes. And the peace of God rule in your heartes: to the which peace ye are called in one body.

<sup>69</sup> The Binham inscriptions in full are as follows:

From north to south

Panel 1: I Peter chapter 1 verses 13–17:

[Wherefore gyrd up the loynes of your mynde,] Be sober and trust perfectly on the grace that is brought unto you by the declaryng of Iesus Chryst as obedient chyldren, that ye geve not your selves over unto youre old lustes by which ye were led, when as yet ye were ignorauant of Chryst, but as he which called you is holy, even so be ye holy also in all maner of conversacyon, because it is written: Be holy, for I am holy, [saith the Lord].

Panel 2: Colossians chapter 3 verses 12–15.

[Wherefore as electe of God,] Holy and beloved, put on tender mercye, kyndnes, humblenes of mynde, mekenes, longe suffringe, forbearynge one another, yf any man have a quarrell agaynst another: as Christ forgave you, even so do ye. Above all these thinges put on love, which is the bonde of perfectnes. And the peace of God rule in your heartes: to the which peace ye are called in one body.

Panel 3: I Peter chapter 3 verses 15b–17

Be ready allwayes to geve an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you, and that with meaknes and feare: havyng a good conscience that where as they backbyte you as evyll doers, they may be ashamed, that falsely accuse your good conversacion in Chryst. For it is better yf the wyll of God be so that ye suffre for well doynge then for evyll doynge.

Panel 4: I Timothy chapter 6 verses 6–9

Godlynes is grete ryches if a man be content with what he hath. For we brought nothing into the worlde, nether maye we cary any thyng out. But when we have fode and rayment we must therewith be content. They that wylbe ryche fall into temptacyon and snares, and into many folysshe and noysome lustes, whiche droune men into perdcion and destruccyon.

Framed and glass-covered panel with the risen Christ continues the passage from I Timothy on panel 4, with verses 10–12.

For covetousnes of money is the roote of all evyll: which whyll some lusted after, they erred from the fayth, and tanglyd them selves with many sorrowes. But thou man of God, flye soch thynges. Folowe ryghtewsnnes, godlynes, fayth, love, patience, meaknes. Fyght the good fyght of fayth. Laye hande on eternall lyfe, wher unto thou art also called, and hast professed a good professyon before many witnesses.

Nearby in the modern church is a small single-framed and glass-covered panel, a fragment from another section of the screen, now lost. It represents the risen Christ carrying a resurrection flag, hand raised in blessing. The fragment of text covering it is what remains of a longer extract from I Timothy chapter 6, verses 10–12.

For covetousnes of money is the roote of all evyll: which whyll some lusted after, they erred from the fayth, and tanglyd them selves with many sorrowes. But thou man of God, flye soch thynges. Folowe ryghtewnes, godlynes, fayth, love, patience, meaknes. Fyght the good fyght of fayth. Laye hande on eternall lyfe, wher unto thou art also called, and hast professed a good professyon before many witnesses.<sup>69</sup>

The reformers at Edwardine Binham, whether the parishioners themselves or, more likely, the diocesan or royal official enforcing drastic change, were doing more than obliterating the Catholic past. Their choice of texts suggests that they sought to replace what they believed to be an alienated and false holiness, embodied in the idolatrous figures of external heavenly mediators and helpers, with an internalized Gospel of personal responsibility and gracious renewal. The whitewash and black-letter text are flaking now, to reveal the gilded and painted remnants of the older piety beneath. In their combination of resonant biblical exhortation superimposed over the cult figures of late medieval Catholicism, the Binham panels are among the most poignant survivals of that violent age, in which the lives of ordinary men and women were caught up in the collision of contrasting understandings of the Christian Gospel.

E.D.

College of St Mary Magdalene, Cambridge  
Feast of the Epiphany, 2005



# INTRODUCTION

## I

This book attempts two tasks usually carried out separately, and by at least two different sets of practitioners. In the first part I have sought to explore the character and range of late medieval English Catholicism, indicating something of the richness and complexity of the religious system by which men and women structured their experience of the world, and their hopes and aspirations within and beyond it. In the second part I have tried to tell the story of the dismantling and destruction of that symbolic world, from Henry VIII's break with the Papacy in the early 1530s to the Elizabethan "Settlement" of religion, which I take to have been more or less secure, or at least in the ascendant, by about 1580. There have, of course, been studies of aspects of English religion which have covered much the same period, notably Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, and many of those who have written about one or other of my two periods have reached out before or after to establish context or to suggest connections: Colin Richmond's sensitive explorations of the religion of the gentry in late medieval Norfolk and Suffolk, Clive Burgess's pioneering work on the parishioners of late medieval Bristol, or Robert Whiting's study of the Reformation in South-west England, provide cases in point.

But a good deal of writing about late medieval religion has been dogged by disciplinary or chronological divisions of labour. Late medieval devotion has been studied largely from within faculties of literature, with a consequent tendency to emphasize the culture of social élites and a stress on individuals or groups, such as the fourteenth-century mystics Rolle, Hilton, the "Cloud" writer, and Julian of Norwich, out of all proportion to their actual impact on the religion of ordinary men and women. Historians who *have* addressed themselves to the religion of the majority, as Keith Thomas did in his book, have been sceptical about or uninterested in the interconnections between "élite" or clerical culture and that of the people at large, and they have therefore presented a picture



of the religion of the people which is seriously incomplete and one-sided. It is an extraordinary feature of Thomas's work, for example, that there is in it virtually no sustained discussion of the liturgy and its effect on the religious world-view of ordinary men and women. Yet, as I shall argue, the liturgy was in fact the principal reservoir from which the religious paradigms and beliefs of the people were drawn.

Again, much writing about late medieval and early modern religion has taken it as axiomatic that there was a wide gulf between "popular" and "élite" religion, that the orthodox teaching of the clergy was poorly understood and only partially practised, that paganism and superstition were rife. That conviction, crudely expressed in tens of thousands of undergraduate and sixth-form essays, has been absorbed from and is certainly amply reflected even in the work of sophisticated historians, for whom heresy, witchcraft, and magic have seemed more interesting, and, presumably, more important, than religious orthodoxy or orthopraxis. Ironically, even the growing number of excellent studies of the religion of the gentry and aristocracy of the period, by Malcolm Vale, Jeremy Catto, Colin Richmond, Christine Carpenter, and others, while adding greatly to our grip of the main features of late medieval piety, have also perhaps contributed to a sense that orthodoxy was the peculiar preserve of the well-educated and well-to-do. To judge by the amount of interest that has been shown in them, the English religious landscape of the late Middle Ages was peopled largely by Lollards, witches, and leisured, aristocratic ladies.<sup>1</sup>

It is my conviction, and a central plank of the argument of the first part of this book, that no substantial gulf existed between the religion of the clergy and the educated élite on the one hand and that of the people at large on the other. I do not believe that it is helpful or accurate to talk of the religion of the average fifteenth-century parishioner as magical, superstitious, or semi-pagan. Nor does it seem to me that the most interesting aspect of late medieval religion lay in the views and activities of those who, like the relatively small number of Lollards, rejected its central tenets and preoccupations. The fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in England witnessed a period of massive catechetical enterprise on the part not only of the bishops and parochial clergy, whose responsibility it mainly was, but also on the part of members of

<sup>1</sup> An excellent bibliographical survey of recent work on the late medieval church is to be found in Peter Heath's "Between Reform and Reformation: the English Church in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth centuries", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XLI, 1990, pp. 647–78.



religious orders and private individuals, like the printers Caxton, Wynkyn de Worde, and Richard Pynson. The teachings of late medieval Christianity were graphically represented within the liturgy, endlessly reiterated in sermons, rhymed in verse treatises and saints' lives, enacted in the Corpus Christi and Miracle plays which absorbed so much lay energy and expenditure, and carved and painted on the walls, screens, bench-ends, and windows of the parish churches. It is true that the wealthy and literate had increasing access to and interest in types of spirituality previously confined to the monastery. Yet within the diversity of medieval religious options there was a remarkable degree of religious and imaginative homogeneity across the social spectrum, a shared repertoire of symbols, prayers, and beliefs which crossed and bridge even the gulf between the literate and the illiterate.

For that reason, in talking of the religious beliefs and practices of the late medieval parishioner, I have avoided all but the occasional use of the notion of "popular religion", a term laden with questionable assumptions about the nature of *non-popular* religion and the gap between the two. Instead I have used the phrase "traditional religion", which does more justice to the shared and inherited character of the religious beliefs and practices of the people, and begs fewer questions about the social geography of pre-Reformation religion. Alas, in history every generalizing term begs some question: How traditional is "traditional"? Not every religious custom in the fifteenth century, however apparently well-established, was immemorial. The greatest feast of the late medieval church, Corpus Christi, was of comparatively recent institution, and the Corpus Christi play cycles, which absorbed the energies of a large proportion of the citizens of towns like York for months on end every year, were new in the fourteenth century. New feasts emerged as optional pious practices, and were eventually imposed as universal observances. New saints were venerated and the old, if not forgotten, at least gracefully retired. New devotional fads were enthusiastically explored by a laity eager for religious variety, increasingly literate, and keenly if conventionally devout. My use of the term "traditional", therefore, is not meant to imply stasis or impassibility, but to indicate the general character of a religious culture which was rooted in a repertoire of inherited and shared beliefs and symbols, while remaining capable of enormous flexibility and variety.

In attempting to delineate the character of that traditional religion I have drawn on a wide variety of sources, from liturgical books to painted images, from saints' lives and devotional treatises to play-texts, and from churchwardens' accounts and ecclesiastical court

records to personal commonplace books and wills. I have also drawn on a good deal of local and parochial material, especially on the riches of the churches of East Anglia, for my non-documentary evidence, but, somewhat unfashionably, this is not a regional study. I am well aware of the importance of regional variation in many of the institutions and practices I have attempted to describe, from parish structures to the cult of the saints, but it was an overview I was seeking. In attempting to provide it I hope I have not imposed a distorting unity on the variety and complexity of the evidence.

It is the contention of the first part of the book that late medieval Catholicism exerted an enormously strong, diverse, and vigorous hold over the imagination and the loyalty of the people up to the very moment of Reformation. Traditional religion had about it no particular marks of exhaustion or decay, and indeed in a whole host of ways, from the multiplication of vernacular religious books to adaptations within the national and regional cult of the saints, was showing itself well able to meet new needs and new conditions. Nor does it seem to me that tendencies towards the "privatizing" of religion, or growing lay religious sophistication and literacy, or growing lay activism and power in gild and parish, had in them that drive towards Protestantism which some historians have discerned. That there was much in late medieval religion which was later developed within a reformed setting is obvious, but there was virtually nothing in the character of religion in late medieval England which could *only* or even *best* have been developed within Protestantism. The religion of Elizabethan England was of course full of continuities with and developments of what had gone before. Even after the iconoclastic hammers and scraping-tools of conviction Protestantism had done their worst, enough of the old imagery and old resonances remained in the churches in which the new religion was preached to complicate, even, in the eyes of some, to compromise, the new teachings. The preservation within the prayer-book pattern of the old rites of passage and some of the old forms of reverence made a totally fresh beginning an impossibility, doubtless to the relief of most of the population. The voracious lay appetite for religious literature which had already been in evidence in the fifteenth century, and which the advent of printing stoked furiously, continued to be catered for in books and broadsides which, for a time at least, freely employed the old types of religious imagery or passable imitations of it. Yet when all is said and done, the Reformation was a violent disruption, not the natural fulfilment, of most of what was vigorous in late medieval piety and religious practice.

That contention, if true, obviously raises a series of major problems for the historian of the Reformation. If medieval religion was decadent, unpopular, or exhausted, the success of the Reformation hardly requires explanation. If, on the contrary, it was vigorous, adaptable, widely understood, and popular, then we have much yet to discover about the processes and the pace of reform. In the second part of the book, therefore, I have tried to address some of the problems raised by the argument of the first part. I have provided a narrative of the religious changes which took place in England in the fifty years after the break with Rome, focusing in particular on the impact of those changes in the parishes, as traditional belief and practice came under ever fiercer pressure from Protestant regimes. In the process I have offered a reassessment of some of the central issues in current Reformation historiography. In particular, I have tried to penetrate the documentary evidence for the apparently ready implementation of the reform measures imposed on the localities from the centre, and to suggest that compliance should not be taken to imply agreement with the Protestant theology underlying the changes. Moreover, I suggest here that the evidence of the spread of Protestantism discerned by many historians in changing will preambles from the late 1530s onwards is largely an optical illusion. Historians have failed to note the pre-Reformation Catholic precedents for types of will formulae taken to be distinctively "Protestant", and have ignored or discounted the prudential factors which led Catholic testators to omit or change Catholic formulae and bequests. Finally, I have tried to explore the implications for our understanding and perception of the Marian religious regime of my central claim about the vitality and popularity of traditional religion. If it is the case that liturgy, ritual, and traditional religious forms and imagery remained central to lay religion into the 1540s and beyond, the preoccupation of the Marian regime with such matters, usually cited as evidence of blinkered reaction and disastrously mistaken priorities, takes on a radically different complexion. The Marian episcopate grasped, just as the reformers themselves did, the continuing vitality and importance of the ritual structures, both material and conceptual, of traditional religion. Bonner, Pole, and their fellow bishops therefore devised and launched a campaign for the restoration of those structures, and for the re-education of the laity in their significance and use, which was both far-seeing and practical, and which was in fact displaying unmistakable signs of success, till the death of Queen Mary wrecked the entire enterprise. In my final chapter I have tried to demonstrate the anxiety of the Elizabethan episcopate about the persistence and vitality of the forms of

traditional religion, an anxiety reflected in the determination with which they set themselves to achieve the destruction of them.

My object in this book is to map the range and vigour of late medieval and early modern English Catholicism, and in the process to exorcize certain types of writing about the English Reformation. But this is not a history of the late medieval English Church, nor of the Reformation in its other aspects. In the interests of keeping an already lengthy work within manageable bounds, I have largely confined my exploration of traditional religion to the parish setting, saying almost nothing about the important and widespread influence of the religious orders. The reader will also search in vain in these pages for any extended discussion of Lollardy, or of the earliest English Protestants. This is not because I doubt the existence or significance of either group, though I do think that Reformation historians have by and large overestimated their numbers and their significance. Because, until comparatively recently, English medieval historians have tended to concentrate on earlier periods, the late medieval English Church has largely been studied by Reformation historians, and hence through the eyes of its critics, Lollard or Protestant, and in the light of its demise at the hands of the Crown – the fifteenth century diminished to the status of a set on which the real drama of Reformation was to take place. The assumptions underlying such an approach to late medieval religion have already been vigorously questioned by sixteenth-century historians like Jack Scarisbrick and Christopher Haigh. If this book with its broader time-span does anything to persuade its readers of the intrinsic interest and vitality of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century English Catholicism, and to set a question mark against some common assumptions about the character and progress of the Reformation up to the middle years of Elizabeth's reign, it will have served its purpose.

## II

The narrative framework of the second part of this book is, I hope, self-explanatory and self-justifying. Something, however, needs to be said here about the structure of the first part. Late medieval religion was both enormously varied and extremely tightly knit: any thread pulled from the multicoloured pattern will lead us eventually to its centre. To select a starting-point and set out themes is therefore to some extent an arbitrary exercise. I have elected to present my material in four clusters, which I hope will help to steer the reader through the sometimes daunting riches of late medieval English religion.

In the first section, "Liturgy, Learning, and the Laity", which consists of two chapters, I explore two ways in which lay folk appropriated for themselves traditional religion, as a system of worship and as an inherited belief system. Since it was in Latin, the late medieval liturgy is often thought of as the preserve of the clergy, a complex and imperfectly intelligible spectacle in which lay folk were passive onlookers. In the first chapter, "Seasons and Signs", I attempt to show that this is in fact a misleading perception, and to examine some of the ways in which the laity were able to appropriate, develop, and use the repertoire of inherited ritual to articulate their experience of community and their own role and status within it, their personal hopes and aspirations, and their sense of the larger order and meaning of the world in which they lived and out of which they would one day die. In the second chapter, "How the Plowman Learned his Paternoster", I explore the formal and informal means by which the official teaching programme of the Church, articulated in synodal and episcopal acts and countless pastoral handbooks, was transmitted to and appropriated by the ordinary parishioner. I argue that this process was one in which lay and clerical initiative had as important a role as hierarchical directives. The evidence of surviving church iconography in painting, carving, and glass, and of the contents of the religious commonplace collections produced by growing lay literacy, suggests that the late medieval Church was a highly successful educator. The fundamentals of Christianity as then conceived had been absorbed, internalized and improvised on by lay people, a process which the advent of printing did not challenge, but endorsed.

The second section of part I, "Encountering the Holy", examines what I take to be three of the central, focal points of the late medieval Catholic sense of the sacred: the Mass, the holy communities of parish and gild, and the saints. Widely different as they are, all three of these focal points have in common a shared preoccupation with the communal, and a sense of the intimate interweaving of this world and the next; all three are concerned with the visible and tangible embodiment of absolute value, of the sacred within the human community.

Prayer is the fundamental religious activity, and in section three, "Prayers and Spells", I consider the ways in which late medieval lay people prayed. The late Middle Ages saw an astonishing proliferation of texts aimed to help lay people to pray, a development in which the advent of printing played a crucial part. On the eve of the Reformation there were probably over 50,000 Books of Hours or Primers in circulation among the English laity. No other



book commanded anything like such a readership, and they offer an unrivalled insight into the religious preoccupations of the people who used them, yet the Primers have been virtually ignored by religious historians. Taking these Primers as a basic source, in these chapters I analyse the modes, methods, and matter of lay prayer, and the beliefs which underlay it. The range of material used by lay people in these books was enormous, from the liturgical prayers of the Little Hours of the Virgin or the Office of the Dead, to bizarre and apparently magical incantations based on the names of God. They therefore pose in an acute form the question of the relation between orthodox Christianity and magic in the religion of the late medieval laity. It is my contention that this “magical” dimension of late medieval religion can best be understood in the context of the official liturgy, from which it borrowed most of its rhetoric and ritual strategies: in this perspective it represents not superstition, a largely meaningless pejorative term, but lay Christianity.

The fourth and final section of part I, “Now, and at the Hour of our Death”, deals with late medieval belief about death and the world beyond death. There is a case for saying that *the* defining doctrine of late medieval Catholicism was Purgatory. These two chapters seek to set that belief in context, to explore late medieval thinking about death and judgement, to examine the deathbed ministry of the Church, to analyse the imagery and institutions in which the doctrine of Purgatory was articulated. But I also suggest that the cult of the dead, so central in the pieties of every late medieval Catholic, was also in an important and often overlooked sense a cult of the living, a way of articulating convictions about the extent and ordering of the human community, and hence of what it was to be human. In this perspective, the Reformation attack on the cult of the dead was more than a polemic against a “false” metaphysical belief: it was an attempt to redefine the boundaries of human community, and, in an act of exorcism, to limit the claims of the past, and the people of the past, on the people of the present.

PART I

THE STRUCTURES OF  
TRADITIONAL RELIGION

*A: Liturgy, Learning,  
and the Laity*





## CHAPTER 1

# SEASONS AND SIGNS: THE LITURGICAL YEAR

Any study of late medieval religion must begin with the liturgy, for within that great seasonal cycle of fast and festival, of ritual observance and symbolic gesture, lay Christians found the paradigms and the stories which shaped their perception of the world and their place in it. Within the liturgy birth, copulation, and death, journeying and homecoming, guilt and forgiveness, the blessing of homely things and the call to pass beyond them were all located, tested, and sanctioned. In the liturgy and in the sacramental celebrations which were its central moments, medieval people found the key to the meaning and purpose of their lives.

For the late medieval laity, the liturgy functioned at a variety of levels, offering spectacle, instruction, and a communal context for the affective piety which sought even in the formalized action of the Mass and its attendant ceremonies a stimulus to individual devotion. Ecclesiastical law and the vigilance of bishop, arch-deacon, and parson sought to ensure as a minimum regular and sober attendance at matins, Mass, and evensong on Sundays and feasts, and annual confession and communion at Easter. But the laity expected and gave far more in the way of involvement with the action and symbolism of the liturgy than those minimum requirements suggest.

It is widely recognized, for example, that the liturgy's ritual structures provided a means of ordering and perhaps also of negotiating social relations. The etiquette of liturgical precedence in the late Middle Ages reflected deep-seated anxieties about order and influence within the "secular" reality of the community. Mervyn James has written eloquently of the way in which the Corpus Christi procession in late medieval communities "became the point of reference in relation to which the structure of precedence and authority in the town is made visually present". This was the "social miracle", the sacramental embodiment of social reality. But it was often, perhaps always, a precarious and difficult process, an attempt to tame and contain disorder, or to impose the hegemony

of particular groups, rather than the straightforward expression of the inner harmonies of a community at peace with itself. Bloody riots broke out during the Chester Corpus Christi procession in 1399, and an ordinance, made at Newcastle in 1536 but referring to earlier events, spoke of regulating the procession "in avoideing of dissencion and discord that hath been among the Crafts of the . . . Towne as of man slaughter and murder and other mischiefs . . . and to induce love charity peace and right".<sup>1</sup>

What was true of the social complexities of the great towns was true also for individuals and for villages, where the passion for one's own proper "worship" was just as highly developed. The Wife of Bath's determination that

In al the parisshe wif ne was ther noon  
That to the offrynge bfore hire sholde goon

is well-known and, as we shall see, far from singular.<sup>2</sup> Mere participation in ceremony, therefore, was no infallible indicator of either individual piety or social harmony. As the village or urban community's most usual gathering-place, the church and the ceremonies conducted there certainly had many functions not envisaged by the rubrics. Young men went to church to survey the young women, and a neighbour attempted the seduction of Margery Kempe as they both went in to evensong on the patronal festival of their parish church. Margery's is our only account of such an encounter by a participant, but the situation was evidently sufficiently common to provide the material for a number of ribald carols:

As I went on Yol Day in our procession,  
Knew I joly Jankin by his mery ton.

*Kyrieleyson.*

Jankin at the Sanctus craked a merie note,  
And yet me thinketh it dos me good, – I payed for his coat.

*Kyrieleyson.*

Jankin at the *Agnus* bered the pax-brede;  
He twinkled, but said nout, and on min fot he trede

*Kyrieleyson*

*Benedicamus Domino*, Crist fro schame me shilde.

<sup>1</sup> Mervyn James, "Ritual, Drama and the Social Body", *Past and Present*, XCVIII, 1983, p. 5; John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*, 1985, pp. 57–72, and "The Mass as a Social Institution", *Past and Present*, C, 1983, pp. 29–61; Alan Nelson, *The Medieval English Stage*, 1974, p. 13; M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 1991, pp. 266–70.

<sup>2</sup> Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, lines 449–50; see below, chapter 3, "The Mass" pp. 126–9.

*Deo Gracias, therto – alas, I go with childe!*  
*Kyrieleyson.*<sup>3</sup>

Some days, like St Agnes's Eve, were less noted for their religious observances than for the rituals by which young women sought to discover the identity of their future sweethearts.<sup>4</sup> And there were in the parish calendar days which hardly seem religious at all. The hock ceremonies, held on the Monday and Tuesday of the second week of Easter, when bands of men and women held travellers of the opposite sex to ransom for fines, are a case in point, but they received some sort of sanction by being used to augment church funds. The plough ceremonies, held on the first working day after Christmas, were fertility rites, when the young men of the village harnessed themselves to a plough which they dragged round the parish, ploughing up the ground before the door of any household which refused to pay a token. Once again, these patently pagan observances were absorbed into the religious calendar: many churches had a "plough-light", perhaps burning before the Sacrament or the Rood. At Cawston in Norfolk the magnificently carved beam of the plough gallery survives, with its fertility prayer and its final pun on the fund-raising plough ales or festivals:

God spede the plow  
 And send us all corne enow  
 our purpose for to mak  
 at crow of cok of the plowlete of Sygate  
 Be mery and glade  
 Wat Goodale this work mad.<sup>5</sup>

There were, too, a number of feast-days which had a clear, Christian, religious rationale, but which had absorbed round them ludic and parodying observances which were always problematic for the sternly orthodox. The boy-bishop celebrations associated with St Nicholas's day on 6 December, and similar celebrations in which children carried out episcopal or priestly functions and exercised rule over their seniors, associated with the feasts of St Katherine, St Clement, and the Holy Innocents, are a case in point. A perfectly good Christian justification could be offered for these popular observances, however close to the bone their elements of parody and misrule brought them: Christ's utterances about children

<sup>3</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech and H. E. Allen, EETS, 1940, p. 14; M. S. Luria and R. L. Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, 1974, no. 86, and see also nos 85, 87.

<sup>4</sup> J. Brand, *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, ed. H. Carew Hazlitt, 1870, I pp. 19–20, 103–7.

<sup>5</sup> N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: North-East Norfolk and Norwich*, 1962, p. 112.

and the Kingdom of Heaven, Isaiah's prophecy that a little child shall lead them, and the theme of inversion and the world turned upside-down found in texts like the "Magnificat" could all be invoked in their defence. Equally clearly, more explosive, more complex, and less pious social tensions were at work here, in a society in which age and authority could bear heavily on the young.<sup>6</sup>

The relation of the Christian calendar to turning-points of the seasons – Christmas and the winter solstice, Easter and spring – meant also that many observances associated with the religious feast served to articulate instincts and energies which were not exclusively Christian, however readily they could be accommodated within a Christian framework. The dances and games with balls and eggs and flowers played in many communities at Easter, sometimes in the church itself, are a case in point, for they are clearly related to the spring theme of fertility, but perhaps the clearest examples are the battles, staged all over Europe, between the flesh and the spirit, Christmas and Lent, on Shrove Tuesday.<sup>7</sup> One such battle was enacted in Norwich in January 1443, when John Gladman (aptly named) disguised himself as King of Christmas, and rode crowned round the city on a horse decked out in tinfoil, preceded by a pageant of the months "disguysed as the seson requiryd" and with Lent (March) clad in "whyte and red heryngs skinns and his hors trappyd with oystershells after him, in token that sadnesse shuld folowe and an holy tyme". This masking was perhaps not as innocent as it was subsequently made out to be: for one thing, it came a month too early, and riots ensued, in which deep-seated and long-standing resentments against the authority over the city of the bishop and priory of Norwich found vent. The church authorities were convinced that the masking was no laughing matter, and that Gladman was the leader of an insurrection. The details need not concern us, for, whatever his motives, Gladman was clearly able to call on a vocabulary derived from the ritual calendar, in which secular and sacred themes, the polarities of fast and feast and downright misrule, were difficult to disentangle.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On the boy-bishop celebrations see Brand, *Antiquities*, I pp. 232–40; R. L. de Molen, "Pueri Christi Imitatio: the Festival of the Boy Bishop in Tudor England", *Moreana*, XI, 1975, pp. 17–29; S. E. Rigold, "The St Nicholas Tokens or 'Boy Bishop' tokens", *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, XXXIV/2, 1978, pp. 87–101.

<sup>7</sup> Brand, *Antiquities*, I pp. 28–57; E. O. James, *Seasonal Feasts and Festivals*, 1961, pp. 225–7, 232–4, 237–8.

<sup>8</sup> Brand, *Antiquities*, I pp. 38–9; N. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich*, 1984, pp. 146–52; more generally, P. Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 1978, pp. 178–243.

Yet while acknowledging the secular functions, respectable or otherwise, of liturgy and liturgical time in late medieval England, it is impossible not to be struck also, and more forcibly, by the abundant evidence of the internalization of its specifically religious themes and patterns and their devotional elaboration in lay piety. This aspect of late medieval devotion is perhaps most familiar to the twentieth century in connection with Christmas, particularly in the enormous richness of the late medieval carol tradition, designed for convivial use yet pervasively indebted to liturgical hymnody: the constant allusive use in carols of Latin tags and whole lines from the hymns and proses of the Offices and Masses of Advent and the Christmas season argues a widespread lay familiarity with those parts of the liturgy. Less obviously, the same familiarity is presupposed in the highly compressed liturgical framework of reference which underlies apparently simple vernacular nativity poems like "I sing of a maiden" and "Adam lay abouten".<sup>9</sup> But the centrality of the liturgy in lay religious consciousness was not confined to Christmas, and even more dramatic if less familiar evidence may be found in a connection with other festivals. Miri Rubin has explored one such, the feast of Corpus Christi.<sup>10</sup> I shall consider here two rather different feasts, Candlemas and Holy Week.

Candlemas, the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary or, alternatively, of the Presentation of the Infant Jesus in the Temple, was celebrated forty days after Christmas, on 2 February, and constituted the last great festival of the Christmas cycle. The texts prescribed for the feast in breviary and missal emphasize the Christmas paradoxes of the strength of the eternal God displayed in the fragility of the new-born child, of the appearance of the divine light in the darkness of human sin, of renewal and rebirth in the dead time of the year, and of the new life of Heaven manifested to Simeon's, and the world's, old age.<sup>11</sup> Celebrated as a "Greater Double" – that is, of lesser solemnity only than the supreme feasts such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, but of equal status to Trinity Sunday, Corpus Christi, and All Saints – its importance in the popular mind is reflected in the fact that it was one of the days on which, according to the legend of St Brendan, Judas was allowed

<sup>9</sup> *The Early English Carol*, ed. R. L. Greene, 2nd ed. 1977, pp. lxxxi–cix; for "I sing of a maiden" see the essays in Luria and Hoffman, *Middle English Lyrics*, pp. 325–49.

<sup>10</sup> Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> *Missale ad Usus Insignis et Praeclarae Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. F. H. Dickinson, 1861–83, cols 696–706; *Breviarium ad Usus Insignis Ecclesiae Sarum*, ed. F. Proctor and C. Wordsworth, 1882–6, III cols 131–48.

out of Hell to ease his torment in the sea.<sup>12</sup> The Purification was marked by one of the most elaborate processions of the liturgical year, when every parishioner was obliged to join in, carrying a blessed candle, which was offered, together with a penny, to the priest at Mass. The candles so offered were part of the laity's parochial dues, and were probably often burned before the principal image of the Virgin in the church.<sup>13</sup> An account survives from fourteenth-century Friesthorpe in Lincolnshire of a row between the rector and his parish because on the day after Candlemas "maliciously and against the will of the parishioners" he took down and carried off all the candles which the previous day had been set before the Image of the Blessed Virgin, "for devotion and penance".<sup>14</sup> The blessing of candles and procession took place immediately before the parish Mass, and, in addition to the candles offered to the priest, many others were blessed, including the great Paschal candle used in the ceremonies for the blessing of the baptismal water at Easter and Pentecost. The people then processed round the church carrying lighted candles, and the "Nunc Dimittis" was sung. Mass began immediately afterwards with the singing of verses from Psalm 47, "We have received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple."<sup>15</sup>

The imaginative power of all this for the laity is readily understood, for the texts of the ceremony are eloquent evocations of the universal symbolism of light, life, and renewal, themes which were carefully expounded in Candlemas sermons.<sup>16</sup> But there was more to the appeal of Candlemas than mere symbolism, however eloquent. The first of the five prayers of blessing in the ritual for Candlemas unequivocally attributes apotropaic power to the blessed wax, asking that "wherever it shall be lit or set up, the devil may flee away in fear and trembling with all his ministers, out of those dwellings, and never presume again to disquiet your servants".<sup>17</sup> Here, undoubtedly, lay one of the principal keys to the imaginative power of Candlemas over lay minds. The people took blessed candles away from the ceremony, to be lit during thunderstorms or

<sup>12</sup> *Mirk's Festial: a Collection of Homilies by Johannes Mirkus*, ed. T. Erbe, EETS, 1905, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Though not always: the Candlemas wax offering at Spelsbury in Oxfordshire was burned before the Trinity. See J. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, 1913, p. 164.

<sup>14</sup> D. M. Owen, *Church and Society in Medieval Lincolnshire*, Lincoln Record Society, 1971, p. 111. This seems also to be the reason for the third *exemplum* given by Mirk in his Candlemas sermon, a conventional story of a wicked woman saved from Hell by the fact that, despite her evil ways, she had maintained a candle before the image of the Virgin in a church; there is no other link with the Candlemas feast.

<sup>15</sup> *Missale*, cols 696–703.

<sup>16</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, ed. E. H. Weatherly, EETS, 1935, pp. 24–9.

<sup>17</sup> *Missale*, col. 697.



in times of sickness, and to be placed in the hands of the dying.

Whose candelie burneth cleere and bright, a wondrous force  
and might,

Doth in these candelles lie, which, if at any time they light,  
They sure believe that neither storm nor tempest dare abide,  
Nor thunder in the skie be heard, nor any divil spide,  
Nor fearfull sprites that walk by night, nor hurt by frost and  
haile.<sup>18</sup>

The Tudor jest-book, *A Hundred Merry Tales*, tells the story of John Adayne, a Suffolk man who unwittingly terrifies his neighbours by wandering around the town in his demon's costume after a local religious play. The squire, on being told that the devil is at his door, "marvelously abashed called up his chaplain and made the holy candle to be lighted and gat holy water" to conjure him away.<sup>19</sup> The beliefs suggested in the jest were no laughing matter. The *Golden Legend* has a story of a devout woman who, unable to attend the Candlemas celebrations at her local church, was granted a dream vision of a heavenly celebration of the Candlemas liturgy, in which Christ was the priest, assisted by the deacon saints Laurence and Vincent, while a company of virgins sang the Candlemas antiphons. The Blessed Virgin herself led the procession and offered a candle. Angels gave the dreamer a candle to offer in her turn to the priest, according to custom, but she refused to part with so great a relic: the angel tried to wrest it from her grip, and she awoke to find the broken stump in her hand (Pl. 1). This piece of holy candle was henceforth revered as a "a grete jewel, tresoure and a relyck", so that "alle the seke whomever it touchid afterward were there-through hole delyvered". This story, almost invariably included in Candlemas sermons and vividly illustrated at Eton and in the Winchester Cathedral Lady Chapel series of frescos of the miracles of the Virgin, was clearly designed to impress on congregations the solemnity and importance of the Candlemas observances, and the rewards of devotion to the Virgin. But the celestial candle-stump must also have provided a paradigm for lay perception of the holiness and power of the candles, the "highly prized sacramental" which they took away from the ceremony.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the distribution of these holy candles, and the

<sup>18</sup> Barnabe Googe, quoted in R. T. Hampson, *Medii Aevi Kalendarium*, I n.d., p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> *A Hundred Merry Tales*, ed. P. M. Zall, 1963, p. 69.

<sup>20</sup> *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton*, ed. F. S. Ellis, 1900, III pp. 25-6; *Festial* 60-1: *Speculum Sacerdotale*, pp. 28-9; L. Eisenhofer, *The Liturgy of the Roman Rite*, 1961, p. 228; M. R. James and E. W. Tristram, "The Wall-Paintings in Eton Chapel and the Lady chapel of Winchester Cathedral", *Walpole Society*, XVII, 1929, pp. 1-44.

empowerment of lay people against hostile and evil forces which they represented, tended to override every other aspect of the feast in popular consciousness, so much so that the clergy might make a point of distinguishing between popular usage and the official character of the feast – “this day is callyd of many men Candyllmasse. But that is of non auctorite, but of custom of folke.”<sup>21</sup> This clerical suspicion of “custom of folk” is understandable, since according to the author of *Dives and Pauper* the laity were capable of diverting such sacramentals to nefarious ends: witches were known to drop wax from the holy candle into the footprints of those they hated, causing their feet to rot off.<sup>22</sup>

Of course none of the scriptural passages associated with the Feast of the Purification makes any mention of candles. The imagery of light in the ceremonies was derived from Simeon’s song, in which the child Jesus is hailed as “a light to lighten the Gentiles”. The *Golden Legend* made it clear that the processional candles on the feast were carried to represent Jesus, and underlined the point with an elaborate exposition of the significance of wax, wick, and flame as representing Jesus’ body, soul, and godhead, an exposition invariably taken over into Candlemas sermons.<sup>23</sup> In lay consciousness, however, the annual procession with candles, far from remaining a secondary symbolic feature, invaded and transformed the scriptural scene. In late medieval paintings of the Purification like the Weston Diptych, in the Order of St John Museum, St John’s Gate, London, the setting is clearly a parish church and the scriptural figures, including the child Jesus Himself, carry candles, like good fifteenth-century parishioners, as they do in the Purification scene in the window at East Harling (Pl. 2). Similarly, in the Chester Purification play Mary offers the scriptural doves, but Joseph declares to Simeon

A signe I offer here allsoe  
of virgin waxe, as other moo,  
in tokeninge shee hase lived oo  
in full devotion.<sup>24</sup>

Mary and Joseph and Anne made a “worshipful processiou” to the Temple with the Child, according to the Candlemas sermon in the *Speculum Sacerdotale*, a phrase which reveals the extent to which popular liturgical observances had come to shape perceptions of the scriptural event which they commemorated.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, ed. P. H. Barnum, EETS, 1976, I pp. 162–3.

<sup>23</sup> *Golden Legend*, III p. 23; *Festial*, p. 60; *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansku and D. Mills, EETS, 1972, I p. 209.

<sup>25</sup> *Speculum Sacerdotale*, p. 28.



The Candlemas ceremonies help to emphasize a distinctive feature of late medieval liturgy, one which brings it close to the practice of private meditation. This tradition, embodied in such works as the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, stressed the spiritual value of vivid mental imagining of the events of the life of Christ, especially his Passion, to “make hym-selfe present in his thoghte as if he sawe fully with his bodyly eghe all the thyngys that be-fell abowte the crosse and the glorious passione of our Lorde Ihesu”.<sup>26</sup> This search for spiritual communion with God through vivid picturing of the events of Christ’s life and death was, of course, evolved as part of an individual and intensely inner spirituality. But it came to be applied to the liturgy itself, and to be seen as the ideal way of participating in the Church’s worship. The pious lay person at Mass was urged to internalize by such meditation the external actions of the priest and ministers. The early sixteenth-century treatise *Meditatyons for goostely exercyse, In the tyme of the masse* interprets the gestures and movements of the priest in terms of the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and urges the layman to “Call to your remembrance and Imprinte Inwardly In your hart by holy meditation, the holl processe of the passyon, frome the Mandy unto the poynt of crysts deeth.”<sup>27</sup> The effect of this sort of guidance was to encourage the development of representational elements in the liturgy and to set the laity looking for these elements. The Candlemas procession and ceremonies, enacting the journey up to Jerusalem and Mary’s offering in the Temple there, were ideally suited to such an understanding of the working of liturgy, and this was certainly an element in their popularity with lay people. Margery Kempe tells how at Candlemas

whan the sayd creatur be-held the pepil wyth her candelys in cherch, hir mende was raveschyd in-to beholdyng of owr Lady offeryng hyr blisful Sone owre Savyowr to the preyst Simeon in the Tempyl, as verily to hir gostly undirstondyng as [if] sche had be ther in hir bodily presens.

This inner contemplation was so intense that, beholding it and

the hevynly songys that hir thowt sche hard whan owr blisful Lord was offeryd up to Symeon that sche myth ful evyl beryn up hir owyn candel to the preyst, as other folke dedyn at the

<sup>26</sup> C. Horstmann (ed.), *Yorkshire Writers*, 1895, I. p. 198.

<sup>27</sup> *Tracts on the Mass*, ed. J. Wickham Legg, Henry Bradshaw Society, XXVII, 1904, pp. 25–6, and see below pp. 118–23.

tyme of the offeryng, but went waveryng on eche syde as it had ben a drunkyn woman.<sup>28</sup>

Margery's response was characteristically extreme, but in essence her expectation of the liturgy was very much that of her neighbours, and there is no reason to think that the "hevylny songys" were anything other than the liturgical chants for the day, sung with all the splendour and resources which a great urban church like St Margaret's, Lynn, could command. The Candlemas ceremonies were designed to summon up the scenes they commemorated, and the quest for the visionary vividness which made Margery unsteady on her feet lay behind the tendency in late medieval England to elaborate and make more explicit the representational and dramatic dimension of the liturgy.

There were limits to how far this process could be carried within the formal structure of the liturgy itself, so the Candlemas ceremonies generated para-liturgical and dramatic elaborations. The gild of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Beverley, founded in the 1350s, moved from liturgical re-enactment to dramatic impersonation. Each year on the morning of Candlemas the gild assembled at some place distant from the church. One of their number, "qui ad hoc aptior invenietur", nobly and decently dressed and adorned as the Queen of Heaven, carried a doll in her arms to represent the Christ child. Two other gild members dressed as Joseph and Simeon, and yet another two dressed as angels carried a candelabrum or hearse of twenty-four thick wax lights. Surrounded by other great lights, and to the accompaniment of "music and rejoicing", they processed to the church, the sisters of the gild immediately after the Blessed Virgin, followed by the brethren, two by two, each carrying a candle of half a pound weight. At the church, the Virgin was to offer her Son to Simeon at the high altar, and then the gild members, one by one, offered their candles and a penny apiece.

There is no explicit mention in the gild certificate of a Mass, but it is very unlikely that this would have taken place without one. The Beverley gild of St Helen, which mounted a similar costumed procession and tableau of the finding of the Holy Cross once a year, and whose gild certificate very closely resembles that of the Candlemas gild, made their offerings at a Mass: the presumption must be that the Candlemas tableau was part of a procession and Mass.<sup>29</sup> But at any rate, what we have here is clearly an elaboration

<sup>28</sup> *Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 198.

<sup>29</sup> Candlemas gild certificates are printed in Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1933, II pp. 252-3; summarized, with that of St Helen's gild, in L. Toulmin-Smith, *English Gilds*, EETS, 1870, pp. 148-50.

and extension of the parochial Candlemas celebrations, encouraging an even deeper or more immediate sense of imaginative participation in the biblical event by gild members than that offered by the prescribed liturgy. And the observances of other Candlemas gilds, even where they lacked the mimetic elements of the Beverley ceremony, must have served similarly to heighten and internalize the themes of the parochial liturgy. Margery Kempe's intense imagining of the scriptural scene may well be connected with the activities of the Candlemas gild which we know functioned in her parish church.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, it is the liturgical celebration which shaped and defined such gild observances, and the same centrality of the pattern of the liturgy is evident in a number of the surviving Corpus Christi plays of the Purification. In the East Anglian *Ludus Coventriae* play of the Purification, for example, Simeon receives the child Jesus with a speech which is simply a literal verse rendering of the opening psalm of the Mass of the feast. While he holds the child in his arms, a choir sings "Nunc Dimittis", almost certainly to the Candlemas processional music. Joseph distributes candles to Mary, Simeon, and Anna, and takes one himself. Having thus formed, in the words of the *Speculum*, a "worshipful processoun", they go together to the altar, where Mary lays the child, and Joseph offers the temple priest five pence. For the audience, the whole play would have been inescapably redolent of the familiar Candlemas liturgy, and in essence an extension of it.<sup>31</sup>

Deliberate evocation of the Candlemas liturgy is even more obvious in the Digby play of Candlemas, where, after Simeon has received the Child and expounded the "Nunc Dimittis", Anna the prophetess calls together a band of girls, and forms them up:

Ye pure Virgynes in that ye may or can,  
with tapers of wax loke ye come forth here  
and worship this child very god and man  
Offrid in this temple be his moder dere.

Simeon, as priest, takes charge

<sup>30</sup> V. B. Redstone (ed.) "Chapels, Chantries and Gilds in Suffolk", *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, XII, 1906, p. 25: this is a reference to the Candlemas gild at Bury St Edmunds, which processed to the Lady altar in St James's church on Candlemas. For the Lynn Candlemas gilds see H. F. Westlake, *The Parish Gilds of Medieval England*, 1919, nos 243-5, 280. For other Candlemas gilds see also nos 9 (Great St Mary's, Cambridge), 93 (Castor, Lincs.), 147 (in the church of St Benedict, Lincoln), 168, 169 (Spalding, Lincs.), 310 (Outwell, Norfolk), 337 (Upwell, Norfolk), 461 (unnamed, but in Yorkshire).

<sup>31</sup> *Ludus Coventriae or the Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, EETS, 1922, pp. 167-9.

Now, Mary, I shull tell you how I am purposed:  
to worshiþe this lord / I will go procession;  
ffor I se anna, with virgynes disposed,  
mekly as nowe, to your sonys laudacion.<sup>32</sup>

Mary and Joseph agree and they all process in order “abought the tempill”, the virgins singing “Nunc Dimittis”, again almost certainly to the liturgical setting for the Candlemas liturgy. At the end of the procession Simeon preaches a little sermon, comparing the candle, wax, wick, and flame, to Christ’s body, soul, and divinity. This is a homiletic commonplace, found in the *Golden Legend* and from there in Mirk’s Candlemas sermon, and so a staple in Candlemas homilies in parish churches up and down the country. Anna then urges the maidens to follow her

. . . and shewe ye summe plesur as ye can,  
In the worshiþe of Iesu, our lady, and seynt Anne.<sup>33</sup>

She then leads the company in a dance. This and the final dance of virgins to the accompaniment of minstrels, with which the play concludes, takes it beyond the scope of liturgy, but not perhaps worlds away from para-liturgical observances like those of the Beverley Candlemas Gild, which, the gild certificate states, were to conclude “cum gaudio”. What is beyond argument, however, is that the spectrum of Candlemas observances evident in these sources testifies to a profound and widespread lay assimilation and deployment of the imagery, actions, and significance of the liturgy of the feast. And the introduction of a “folk” element into the Digby play, in the form of dances “in the worshiþe of Iesu, our lady, and seynt Anne”, serves to warn us against underestimating the links between liturgical observance and the “secular” celebratory and ludic dimensions of lay culture at the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Ceremonies of Holy Week*

Holy Week, the period from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, constituted the heart of the late medieval Church’s year, just as the Passion of Christ, solemnly commemorated then, lay at the heart of late medieval Christianity. The ceremonies of Holy Week were extremely elaborate, especially from the Wednesday onwards, when

<sup>32</sup> *The Digby Plays with an Incomplete Morality*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, 1896, pp. 18–23.

<sup>33</sup> *Golden Legend*, III p. 23; *Festial*, p. 60.

<sup>34</sup> The “Anna” of the play is not Anna Propheta, but the Lord’s grandmother, with whom she was sometimes identified. The Digby play was performed on 26 July 1512, the feast of St Anne.

each day had its distinctive ritual observances. But much of the ceremonial prescribed in the Sarum rite had by the fifteenth century long since lost its imaginative power for lay people. The Easter Vigil, for example, with its elaborate ceremony of light, even now one of the most striking and moving parts of Catholic liturgy, was not held in darkness but on the morning of Holy Saturday, in broad daylight, and appears to have attracted no lay interest whatever. Lay people did attend the *Tenebrae* services on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. These were celebrations of the divine Office during which candles were snuffed out one by one to symbolize the abandonment of Jesus by his disciples: the standard sermon collections include explanations of this striking ceremony.<sup>35</sup> But to judge by lay sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the aspects of Holy Week which consistently seemed to matter to parishioners were the Palm Sunday procession, the veneration or “creeping to the cross” on Good Friday, the observances associated with the Easter sepulchre, and of course the annual reception of communion – “taking one’s rights” – on Easter Sunday, an action which was necessarily preceded by going to confession. Confession and communion will be dealt with elsewhere, but an exploration of the other components of Holy Week observance will do much to flesh out our sense of the ways in which the laity appropriated and used the liturgy.

The Palm Sunday procession was by the end of the Middle Ages the most elaborate and eloquent of the processions of the Sarum rite, with the possible exception of the special case of *Corpus Christi*. The parish Mass began as usual with the blessing and sprinkling of holy water. Immediately that had been done the story of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem and greeting by the crowds with palms was read from St John’s Gospel. The priest then blessed flowers and green branches, which were called palms but were usually yew, box, or willow.<sup>36</sup> The palms were distributed and clergy and people processed out of the church, led by a painted wooden cross without a figure. The procession moved to a large cross erected in the churchyard, normally on the north side of the building at its east end, the choir singing a series of anthems recapitulating the biblical story of Palm Sunday (Pl. 3).

While the palms were being distributed a special shrine supported on two poles was prepared, into which the church’s principal relics

<sup>35</sup> *Festial*, pp. 117–18; *Speculum Sacerdotale*, pp. 101–2.

<sup>36</sup> *Missale*, cols 253–7. The palms were intended, of course, for use in the procession, but were certainly taken back to people’s homes and put to apotropaic use; one of the benedictions prayed for the banishment of “adverse powers” wherever the palms were brought and blessings for the inhabitants of any such home.

were placed, along with the Blessed Sacrament to represent Christ. According to the rubrics, this shrine, carried by two clerks and sheltered by a silken canopy, was now brought in procession to join the parishioners and clergy at the churchyard Palm cross. By the end of the Middle Ages this aspect of the rite had been simplified in many places, the Host being carried instead in a monstrance by a single priest. In the meantime the story of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem from Matthew's Gospel was read to the parishioners in the churchyard. The procession with the Blessed Sacrament now approached the parochial procession gathered at the Cross, and, according to the ritual, three clerks wearing surplices and plain choir copes sang an anthem, "Behold, O Sion, thy king cometh", after which clergy and choir venerated the Sacrament by kneeling and kissing the ground before it. In popular English practice this part of the ritual was elaborated, the singers of the anthem being costumed as Old Testament prophets with flowing wigs and false beards: payments "for hyering of the heres for the p[ro]fetyes uppon Palme Sundaye" are a regular item of expense in many surviving sets of churchwardens' accounts.<sup>37</sup> At Long Melford in Suffolk the part of the prophet was played by "a boy with a thing in his hand", a wand or staff of some sort or possibly a scroll, who stood on the turret over the Rood-loft stairs, on the outside of the Clopton aisle on the north side of Melford church, and pointed to the Sacrament while the "Ecce Rex Tuus" was sung.<sup>38</sup> The two processions then merged, and a series of invocations to the Host were sung:

Hail, thou whom the people of the Hebrews bear witness to as  
Jesus . . .

Hail, light of the world, king of kings, glory of heaven

Hail, our salvation, our true peace, our redemption, our  
strength . . .

During the singing the procession moved round the east end of the church to the south side, where a high scaffold had been erected (Pl. 4). Seven boys stood on this scaffold and greeted the Host with the hymn "Gloria, Laus et honor" ("All glory, laud and honour to Thee, Redeemer King"). In a further elaboration of the prescribed ritual, flowers and unconsecrated Mass-wafers ("obols" or "singing-cakes") were usually strewn before the Sacrament from this

<sup>37</sup> H. J. Feasey, *Ancient English Holy Week Ceremonial*, 1893, pp. 75–6; J. C. Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, 1913, pp. 254–5.

<sup>38</sup> Sir W. Parker, *The History of Long Melford*, 1873, p. 72: for the reduction of the rite by the replacement of shrine by a monstrance (probably in the interests of visibility, and in parishes where there was only one priest) see R. Pecoock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*, ed. C. Babington, 1860, I. p. 203.



scaffolding, to be scrambled for by the children. At Long Melford they were "cast over among the boys". There is no doubting the attraction of this picturesque feature of the Palm Sunday ceremonies to lay people, or its dramatic potential, and the singing of the hymn "Gloria, Laus" and scattering of flowers before the procession were adopted wholesale in the "N-Town" play of the Entry into Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup>

The procession then moved to the west door, where the clerks carrying the Sacrament in its shrine stood on either side of the door and raised the poles above their heads. In many parishes the priest elaborated the prescribed ceremony at this point by taking the processional cross and striking the door with its foot, symbolically demanding entry for Christ, a gesture interpreted as representing Christ's harrowing of Hell, after bursting the gates of death. For some reason this gesture was expressly forbidden by the rubricists, but it was clearly widespread and evidently spoke to many parishioners: Margery Kempe comments specifically on its devotional effect on her.<sup>40</sup> The clergy and people entered the church, passing under the shrine with the Sacrament, and then the whole procession moved to its culminating point before the Rood-screen. All through Lent a great painted veil had been suspended in front of the Crucifix (Pl. 5) on the Rood-screen. This veil was now drawn up on pulleys, the whole parish knelt, and the anthem "Ave Rex Noster" was sung, while the clergy venerated the cross by kissing the ground:

Hail, our King, Son of David, Redeemer of the World, whom the prophets proclaimed the saviour of the house of Israel who is to come. You indeed are the saving victim whom the Father has sent into the world, for whom the saints have waited from the beginning of the world. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest.<sup>41</sup>

Mass then began, but at the Gospel there was a final, striking deviation from the normal Sunday liturgy. The whole of the Passion story from St Matthew's Gospel was sung, by three clerks in churches which had the resources, the words of Jesus in a bass

<sup>39</sup> Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, loc. cit.; *Ludus Coventriae*, p. 241.

<sup>40</sup> For official disapproval see Clement Maydeston, "Crede Michi" in *Tracts of Clement Maydeston with the Remains of Caxton's Ordinale*, ed. C. Wordsworth, Henry Bradshaw Society, VII, 1894, pp. 50-1; for the actual practice see *The Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 186-7, and J. Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, 1822, III part 2, p. 392; for similar observances in Germany, but associated there with Easter Sunday, see R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*, 1987, p. 27.

<sup>41</sup> *Missale*, col. 260.

register, the narrator in a tenor one, and the words of the crowd in an alto. It was widely believed that crosses made during this reading of the Passion narrative had apotropaic powers, and many people brought sticks and string to church on Palm Sunday to be made up into crosses, a dimension of popular participation in the ritual which became a particular target of reformed criticism. Less controversially, in many parishes the reading of the Gospel was elaborated in the interests of dramatic effect and it was often sung by clerks standing in the Rood-loft itself, at the foot of the Crucifix which the whole parish had just venerated. With regional variations, this highly dramatic ritual was enacted all over late medieval Europe, but the English versions had a number of distinctive features, of which the most important was the use of the Blessed Sacrament to represent Christ. In many parts of Europe the presence of Christ was symbolized by a cross or a Gospel book, in Germany usually by a life-sized wooden carving of Christ on a donkey, which ran on wheels, the *Palmesel*.<sup>42</sup>

The *Palmesel* was an obvious manifestation of a feature of late medieval worship we have already noticed in connection with the Candlemas rituals, the tendency to turn liturgy into "sacred performance". The use of the Sacrament in English Palm Sunday ceremonies was at once more and less dramatic than the representational realism evident in the *Palmesel*, which looked like Jesus and directly represented the ride into Jerusalem. The Blessed Sacrament did not look like Jesus, but, far more vividly, *was* Jesus, body, blood, soul, and divinity, taking part in the communal re-enactment of his entry into the city not by a wooden proxy, but with all the overwhelming reality which late medieval believers attributed to the Host.

The Host was rarely carried in procession outside the church: the other festival on which this was done, Corpus Christi, was conceived and presented in late medieval communities as a celebration of the corporate life of the body social, created and ordered by the presence of the Body of Christ among them. The Palm Sunday procession, from which much of the Corpus Christi ritual was derived, was also a celebration of the redeeming presence of the divine within the community, made visible and concrete as the Host was carried around the churchyard, surrounded by the entire parish. The York play of the entry into Jerusalem catches this dimension of the Palm Sunday celebrations particularly clearly,

<sup>42</sup> Scribner, *Popular Culture*, pp. 25–6; L. Eisenhofer, *The Liturgy of the Roman Rite*, 1961, pp. 186–7; Terence Bailey, *The Processions of the Sarum Rite and the Western Church*, 1971, pp. 116–17.



when eight citizens of Jerusalem greet Christ in a series of invocations which are highly reminiscent of, and probably modelled on, the "Ave" invocations of the Palm Sunday procession

Hayll conqueror, hayll most of myght,  
 Hayle rawnsouer of synfull all,  
 Hayll pytefull, hayll lovely light,  
 Hayll to us welcome be schall,  
 Hayll kyng of Jues.  
 Hayll comely corse that we the call  
 With mirthe that newes.  
 Hayll domysman dredful, that all schall deme,  
 Hayll that all quyk and dede schall lowte,  
 Hayll whom our worscippe most will seme  
 Hayll whom all thyng schall drede and dowte.  
 We welcome the,  
 Hayll and welcome of all abowte  
 To owre cete.<sup>43</sup>

The similarity of these invocations to the prayers used by the laity at the elevation at Mass is very striking. The dramatic Christ of the play has been subsumed into the Eucharistic Christ. The play's "Burghers of Jerusalem" are patently citizens of York, welcoming the presence of Christ among them, like the four yeomen who carried the canopy over the Sacrament on Palm Sunday at Long Melford, instead of the solitary clerk stipulated in the rubrics. It was precisely this entry into "owre cete" of Christ, ransomier and doomsman, in the form of the "comely corse" (Pl. 6), Corpus Christi, surrounded by "al the pepil", that the parish liturgy of Palm Sunday celebrated. As the *Ludus Coventriae* play of the entry has it, "Neyborys gret joye in our herte we may make that this hefly kyng wole vycyte this cyte."<sup>44</sup>

Palm Sunday was emphatically a celebration of the saving work of Christ: the cross and the miracle of the Mass which perpetuated the effects of the cross within the community lay at its centre. But the last days of Holy Week, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day, formed a distinctive unit by themselves. They were packed with striking ceremonial and charged with intense religious emotion,

<sup>43</sup> R. Beadle (ed.) *The York Plays*, 1982, p. 219.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Chester Mystery Cycle*, p. 258; *Ludus Coventriae*, p. 240; Parker, *History of Long Melford*, p. 72. It is notable that Roger Martin's account of the liturgical year at Long Melford focuses on processions and other communal forms of celebration, and moves straight from Palm Sunday to Corpus Christi. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, p. 187, the communal language and emphasis on "the pepil" in Margery's account of the Holy Week liturgy is also striking.

for the ceremonies and texts of these days gathered up and gave eloquent expression to all the major themes of late medieval piety. There can be no question of the importance of these ceremonies for lay people, an importance reflected in the extended Holy Week meditation which forms chapters 78–81 of *The Book of Margery Kempe*.<sup>45</sup> It is not perhaps surprising to find an aspirant to sanctity like Margery interested in these solemn ceremonies, but their wider appeal was grudgingly acknowledged by John Mirk, in his *Festial*. In addition to the model sermons for each of the major days of Holy Week, Mirk provided a compendium of ritual notes for unlearned clergy unable to make “a graythe answer” to the eager questions put to them by parishioners anxious to make sense of the unusually rich ceremonial of the season. Mirk, writing at a time of anxiety about the spread of Lollardy, chose to interpret such questioning as springing from a desire to expose the ignorance of the clergy, but there was no denying the phenomenon. “Lewde men,” he complained, “wheche buthe of many wordys and proude in hor wit” will insist on asking priests questions “of thynges that towchen to servyce of holy chyrche, and namly of thys tyme”.<sup>46</sup>

The Easter Triduum began with Maundy Thursday, when Mass was celebrated with extra solemnity, the priest consecrating three Hosts, one for his communion at the Mass, one for his communion at the Good Friday liturgy, and the third to be used in the sepulchre ceremonies. After Mass the altars of the church were ritually stripped of all their coverings and ornaments, while a series of responsories from the Passion narratives and the prophets were sung. As each altar was stripped the priest intoned a collect of the saint to whom it was dedicated. Each of the altars then had water and wine poured on it and was washed, using a broom of sharp twigs.<sup>47</sup> Every detail of this vivid ceremony was allegorized in popular preaching – the stripping of the altars was the stripping of Jesus for death, the water and wine were the water and blood from his side, the broom of twigs the scourges or the crown of thorns.<sup>48</sup> In cathedrals, religious houses, and great churches this ceremony was followed immediately by the Maundy, or solemn washing of feet, in imitation of Christ in the account of the last supper in St John’s Gospel. To judge by the silence on this subject of surviving Holy Week parish sermons explaining the ritual, this foot-washing was omitted in many parish churches. In Mirk’s compendium of information on the ceremonies of Holy Week the scriptural foot-

<sup>45</sup> *Book of Margery Kempe*, pp. 184–97.

<sup>46</sup> *Festial*, pp. 124–9.

<sup>47</sup> *Missale*, cols 308–11.

<sup>48</sup> *Festial*, pp. 125–7.

washing is mentioned, but he is more directly concerned to explain a feature of the ceremonies of the day which would have impinged directly on lay liturgy, the absence of the pax from the Maundy Mass, "for Iudas betrayd Crist thys nyght wyth a cosse".<sup>49</sup>

Good Friday in the late Middle Ages was a day of deepest mourning. No Mass was celebrated, and the main liturgical celebration of the day was a solemn and penitential commemoration of the Passion. The whole of the narrative from St John's Gospel was read, with a small dramatic embellishment: at the words "They parted my garments among them" the clerks parted and removed two linen cloths which had been specially placed for the purpose on the otherwise bare altar. After the Gospel there was a series of solemn prayers for the world and the Church. A veiled Crucifix was then brought into the church, while the "Improperia" or "Reproaches" were sung, a series of scriptural verses contrasting the goodness of God and the ingratitude of his people. The cross was then unveiled in three stages, the priest singing, each time on a higher tone, "Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the saviour of the world. Come, let us worship."

Clergy and people then crept barefoot and on their knees to kiss the foot of the cross, held by two ministers. After the adoration of the cross, a Host consecrated at the previous day's Mass was brought, and the priest, having recited the Lord's Prayer, communicated as if at Mass. The service concluded with the recitation of vespers without any music.<sup>50</sup>

Creeping to the cross was one of the most frequent targets of Protestant reformers from the 1530s onwards, and there can be no doubt of the place it held in lay piety: well into the Elizabethan period Bishop Grindal would complain that on Good Friday "some certeyn persons go barefooted and barelegged to the church, to creepe to the crosse."<sup>51</sup> But the most imaginatively compelling of the Good Friday ceremonies, though associated with the cross, came after the solemn liturgy had ended. This was the custom of the "burial" of Christ in the Easter sepulchre, an observance which left a deep mark not only in the minds of medieval English men and women but in the very structure of many parish churches. At the end of the liturgy of Good Friday, the priest put off his Mass vestments and, barefoot and wearing his surplice, brought the third Host consecrated the day before, in a pyx. The pyx and the Cross which had been kissed by the people during the liturgy were

<sup>49</sup> *Festial*, p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> *Missale*, cols 316–33.

<sup>51</sup> Brand, *Antiquities*, I. p. 86.

wrapped in linen cloths and taken to the north side of the chancel, where a sepulchre had been prepared for them. This was normally a timber frame, probably the shape and size of the "hearse" which, covered with a pall, formed the focus of the normal obituary ceremonies at funerals and month's minds. Like those hearses, the sepulchre was covered with a rich cloth, often stained or embroidered with scenes from the Passion and a picture of the Resurrection, and candles burned before it. The Host and Crucifix were laid within it while the priest intoned the Psalm verse "I am counted as one of them that go down to the pit," and the sepulchre was censed. A watch was then kept before it continually till Easter. Since large numbers of candles needed tending during this period, and since the pyx in which the Sacrament was "buried" was usually extremely valuable, payments to parishioners or parochial officers like the sexton or clerk for maintaining this watch, and for "brede, ale and fyre" to see them through the chilly night hours are common in pre-Reformation churchwardens' accounts. Early on Easter Morning, before Mass was rung, the clergy assembled, all the lights in the church were lit, and a procession formed to the sepulchre, which was censed. The Host was removed without ceremonial to its normal position in the hanging pyx above the high altar. The Crucifix was then solemnly "raised" from the sepulchre and carried triumphantly round the church while all the bells were rung and the choir sang the anthem "Christus Resurgens".

Christ, rising again from the dead, dieth now no more. Death shall no more have dominion over him. For in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Now let the Jews declare how the soldiers who guarded the sepulchre lost the king when the stone was placed, wherefore they kept not the rock of righteousness. Let them either produce him buried, or adore him rising, saying with us, Alleluia, Alleluia.

The cross was placed on an altar on the north side of the church, and was once more venerated by people creeping towards it. In many places, especially cathedrals and the great town churches, growing devotion to the Host led to ritual development: the image used in this ceremony was often not a simple Crucifix, but an image of Christ which had a hollow space in the breast covered with a crystal in order to form a monstrance for the Host. The ceremony of creeping to the cross thereby became an act of solemn eucharistic worship. Matins and Mass were then sung, with a more than usually elaborate procession. Throughout the week the empty sepulchre remained a focus of devotion – candles burned before it during service time and it was solemnly censed at vespers each

evening, before being finally removed before Mass on the Friday in Easter week.<sup>52</sup>

The Easter sepulchre and its accompanying ceremonial constitute something of an interpretative crux for any proper understanding of late medieval English religion. The sepulchre was emphatically a central part of the official liturgy of Holy Week, designed to inculcate and give dramatic expression to orthodox teaching, not merely on the saving power of Christ's cross and Passion but on the doctrine of the Eucharist. With its abundance of lights and night watches it constituted an especially solemn form of public worship of the Host, in many communities far more elaborate even than the Corpus Christi procession. At the same time it had become by the fifteenth century an intense and genuinely popular focus for lay piety and devotional initiative. The complexity of the cluster of ideas and observances which gathered around the sepulchre in popular understanding and practice also suggests that we should not too hastily accept the widely held view of the theological imbalance of late medieval Christianity, where it sometimes seems that "piety is becoming fevered, and that Christ's *humanitas* has become synonymous with his passibility".<sup>53</sup> Expressing to the full as it did the late medieval sense of the pathos of the Passion, the sepulchre and its ceremonies were also the principal vehicle for the Easter proclamation of Resurrection.

It is not difficult to establish the ubiquity of lay awareness of and interest in the Easter sepulchre. Since every church was obliged to provide one for the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies, expenses for the making, maintenance, lighting, and watching of the sepulchre feature in most surviving churchwardens' accounts.<sup>54</sup> In most places it was a movable wooden frame, which was adorned with drapery and carved or painted panels. Such structures could be immensely elaborate. In the 1470s St Mary Redcliffe in Bristol acquired "a new sepulcre well gilt with golde", which had an image of the risen Christ, a model of Hell complete with thirteen devils, four sleeping soldiers armed with spears and axes, four painted angels with detachable timber wings, as well as representations of

<sup>52</sup> Feasey, *Holy Week*, pp. 168–9; E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage*, 1903, II pp. 19–24; A. Heales, "Easter Spulchres: their Object, Nature and History", *Archaeologia*, XLI, 1869, pp. 263–308; V. Sekules, "The Tomb of Christ at Lincoln and the Development of the Sacrament Shrine: Easter Sepulchres Reconsidered" in *British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions*, VIII, 1982, pp. 118–31; P. Sheingorn, "The Sepulchrum Domini, a Study in art and Liturgy", *Studies in Iconography*, IV, 1978, pp. 37–61. Sekules considers that some of these sepulchres were used as Sacrament shrines for reservation all the year through.

<sup>53</sup> J. A. W. Bennett, *The Poetry of the Passion*, 1982, p. 59; Bennett was characterizing a view he did not himself hold.

<sup>54</sup> Cox, *Churchwardens' Accounts*, pp. 259–60; Feasey, *Holy Week*, pp. 158–63.



God the Father and the Holy Ghost “coming out of Heaven into the Sepulchre”.<sup>55</sup> But in many churches it was a permanent architectural and sculptured feature. This might take the form of a canopied niche set in the north wall of the chancel or a table-tomb on the north side of the high altar with its east end against the east wall of the chancel. Either way, lay financial resources were lavished on the elaboration of the sepulchre. There was an established iconography – the sleeping soldiers, Christ rising or risen, the three Maries or St Mary Magdalene, adoring angels. Magnificent and elaborately carved examples survive in Lincoln Cathedral, at Heckington in Lincolnshire (Pl. 7), at Northwold in Norfolk, and at Hawton, Arnold, and Sibthorpe in Nottinghamshire.<sup>56</sup>

Sepulchres of this sort represented major pieces of patronage, but the desire to associate oneself with the parish’s annual worship of Christ in the Easter mysteries extended right across the social spectrum and took many forms. For the very wealthy there was the opportunity to build a tomb for oneself which was also the tomb of Christ, and to adorn it with Resurrection imagery which spoke of personal hopes as well as beliefs about Christ. Scores of such burials survive, like John Hopton’s tomb at Blythburgh or the Clopton tomb in Long Melford (Pl. 8), with the donor’s family painted round the arch of the sepulchre and the risen Christ in its vaulting. A fascinating and distinctive group of Easter sepulchre monuments, all of them probably dating from after the break with Rome, survives in the Chichester area. The sepulchre erected by William Ernley at West Wittering, possibly as late as 1540, has a sculpted Christ vigorously striding out of his box-tomb while the soldiers slump around it. On Agatha George’s proprietorial sepulchre at Selsey the donor and her husband kneel, flanked by St Agatha and St George, the patrons who encode her name. Paradoxically, the central figure of the risen Christ has been chiselled away by iconoclasts. On the Sackville monument at Westhampnett (Pl. 9) the donors kneel on either side of a Corpus Christi image of the dead Christ, supported by the other members of the Trinity.<sup>57</sup>

These lavish tombs were designed to replace the temporary framework which formed the sepulchre in most churches, and thereby to create a permanent association between the memory of the donor and the parish’s most solemn act of worship. Sometimes donors did not aspire to incorporate their dust quite so inescapably within the liturgy: mere proximity to the sepulchre might be

<sup>55</sup> A. Heales, “Easter Sepulchres”, p. 301; for an equally elaborate sepulchre at St Stephen’s, Coleman St., in London see Feasey, *Holy Week*, pp. 166–7.

<sup>56</sup> J. C. Cox and A. Harvey, *English Church Furniture*, 2nd ed. 1908, pp. 74–8.

<sup>57</sup> N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex*, 1965, pp. 320, 373, 377.