

REFORMATION DIVIDED

Catholics, Protestants
and the Conversion of England

EAMON DUFFY



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LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Continuum
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2017

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication data has been applied for.

ISBN:	HB:	978-1-4729-3436-9
	EPDF:	978-1-4729-3434-5
	EPUB:	978-1-4729-3437-6

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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Introduction

Divided Reformations

In 1517 an obscure German theologian from an undistinguished new university initiated a debate about popular religious practice which was destined to open up ‘the greatest geological faultline in European civilisation’.¹ Martin Luther’s angry critique of the sordid late medieval traffic in religious blessings known as ‘indulgences’ would rapidly escalate into a more fundamental challenge to the theological structures which had underpinned the evolution of Western society since the fall of the Roman empire. There ensued more than a century of fratricidal ideological conflict, in which many thousands would die, and the religious, social and political map of the European continent would be redrawn.

This stupendous upheaval has usually been known as ‘the Reformation’, an unsatisfactory designation concealing a battery of value judgements. Though the new religious identities which emerged from these conflicts shared a common repudiation of the papacy and of the allegedly materialistic religious system which the papacy headed, they were profoundly, often murderously, divided among themselves on almost everything else. ‘Reformation’, moreover, with its implication that a ‘good’ form of Christianity replaced a ‘bad’ one, begs the question of the credibility, health and religious worth of the beliefs and practices ‘reformed’ communities rejected. Till comparatively recently, these ‘Reformation’ movements were viewed as the product of a single energy, unwitting agents or heralds of modernity, and so, self-evidently superior to the medieval Catholicism they replaced. It was a superiority thought to have been

demonstrated, among other ways, by the rapidity with which the old religion collapsed before them.

Hence older anglophone histories of the reformation commonly started with a brief résumé of the late medieval background, designed to demonstrate the dysfunctional character of late medieval Christianity, with the bulk of the narrative focused on the spread of Protestantism in the 50 years or so after 1517. The textbook which dominated the study of the English reformation in schools and universities for two generations from 1965 suggested that the reformation was all over, bar the shouting, by 1559.² And though it was recognised that the Catholic Church had itself engaged in an internal process of reform in the course of the sixteenth century, this reform, with various qualifications, was understood primarily as a response to the Protestant challenge, and hence more often than not designated the ‘counter-reformation’.³

Few of these assumptions have worn well. We are far more aware now of the richness, resilience and social embedding of the late medieval religion so often caricatured or ignored in the older narratives. We are correspondingly more alert to the protracted and difficult labour involved in what Patrick Collinson called the ‘birthpangs’ of reformation, Catholic or Protestant.⁴ The comparatively recent realisations that ‘reformation’ was not a confessional monopoly, but a fundamental aspect of the transformations of Catholic as well as Protestant communities in the sixteenth and following centuries, and that such transformations involve complexity and difference, and take a long time, are reflected in two of the best recent textbooks on early modern religion. Diarmaid MacCulloch’s wide-ranging 2003 study, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided*, extended its time frame down to 1700, gave extensive coverage to Catholic as well as Protestant reform movements, emphasised the divisions and diversity of ‘Protestantisms’ in the plural, and devoted a third of its space to the long-term experience ‘of Europe’s Reformations and Counter-Reformations’.⁵ The American historian Carlos Eire’s even more massive 2016 survey similarly adopted a two-century span, gave more or less equal coverage to Catholic and Protestant reform, and embodied its insistence on the pluralism of the religious past in its title, *Reformations: The Early Modern World*.⁶ MacCulloch’s religious formation was Protestant (he is the child of an Anglican vicarage),

Eire is a Catholic originally from Cuba, making the convergence of their historiographical choices all the more telling.

The history of these reformations continues to fascinate – and to matter – because it is universally recognised that many of the dominant features of modernity originated in the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That legacy itself, of course, is highly contested. Everyone recognises that the split between Catholics and Protestants (easily parodied as the warm south versus the cold north, wine drinkers versus beer drinkers, and so on) created ideological, cultural and political divisions which constitute ‘the shaping fact of European identity’, and hence of Europe’s impact on the rest of the world.⁷ Opinions diverge radically, however, as to whether that influence was essentially benign or otherwise. A long tradition of anglophone historiography took it as axiomatic that the reformation (singular) was the midwife of the modern world, and therefore, in the words of *1066 and All That*, a Good Thing.⁸

By contrast, Brad Gregory’s recent study of the long-term legacy of the reformation era suggested that the Protestant assault on the intellectual and moral underpinning of Catholic Christianity fatally if unintentionally undermined the coherence of the Western intellectual and moral tradition. Gregory, a distinguished American Catholic historian, is the author of the best study of the persecution of religious minorities in early modern Europe, and an authority on the radical early Protestant sectarians usually lumped together under the blanket term Anabaptists.⁹ But in his polemical book *The Unintended Reformation*, he insists that the genesis of many of the intellectual ills of secular modernity must be laid fairly and squarely at the door of the Protestant reformation. Gregory accepts that late medieval Christianity was ‘an institutionalised worldview . . . deeply marked by a gulf between its ideals and its realities’.¹⁰ Nevertheless he believes that the market of values and the control of religion by the modern state in the name of religious liberty has brought about the progressive privatisation and exclusion of religion from the public sphere – problems, he argues, which stem either directly or indirectly from the activities of the sixteenth-century reformers.

Catholic polemics against the errors of the reformers have a long pedigree, of course, and in modern times it is easy to think of precedents for Gregory’s approach, some of them very distinguished – Jacques

Maritain's *Trois Réformateurs* springs to mind.¹¹ And, of course, the links between the reformation and modernity have been asserted by many analysts with no Catholic axe to grind, most notably in Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and in the more domestic British form given the argument by the Anglican Christian socialist R. H. Tawney.¹² In fact Gregory gives short shrift to the Weber thesis that the rise of capitalism was facilitated and advanced by a Protestant work ethic, and is emphatic that the reformers had no intention either of 'disenchanted the universe' or of legitimating acquisitiveness, both of which are Weberian themes. Nevertheless, he argues that in the long term the Protestant repudiation of a sacramental understanding of the material world opened the door to precisely such a disenchantment, by facilitating the removal of the question of God from scientific discourse about the natural world. The reformation's sharp distinction between the realms of matter and spirit and its hostility to scholasticism, he believes, ended more than a thousand years of Christianity as a framework for shared intellectual life in the Latin West.

Gregory's argument sharpens when he turns to the responsibility of the reformation for other aspects of secularism: the hyperpluralism of modern Western society, rooted in the absence of any rational basis for agreement about 'life questions' of value and truth, and hence of any rational way of arriving at a social platform based on shared beliefs. Here Gregory's trajectory as a historian of radical Protestantism is crucial to his argument. Protestantism is often thought of as a single force, comparable to the Catholic Church. But this, he insists, is an illusion, created by the accident of the social and political conservatism of magisterial reformers like Calvin and Luther, and the emergence of Protestant states which embraced one or other of those two Protestant syntheses and enforced a more or less traditional kind of political and moral order. In fact, however, underneath this apparent coherence, which was purely pragmatic, the fundamental reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, and the absolute rejection of tradition as a source of religious truth, proved a radical solvent which made impossible any agreement about truth elicited by communal effort within the context of a shared hermeneutic tradition.¹³ Indeed the only thing about which the reformers agreed, he contends, was their repudiation of Catholicism. Those

radical disagreements would ultimately lead to the emergence of societies like ours, which can maintain their unity only by banishing what Gregory calls the 'life questions' from the public forum. Religious toleration as a solution to the internal disunities of the early modern state in fact proved a powerful incubator of radical individualism, and ultimately of moral chaos. The murderous religious controversies of the early modern era persuaded many in the long term that, since religious disagreements could not be resolved, they should not matter, and did not matter.

And in this marginalising of religious truth as impossibly elusive, Gregory sees one of the roots of the acquisitive society. All the major reformers as well as their radical Protestant opponents denounced excessive wealth in traditional Christian terms, and the roots of both capitalism and consumerism were already evident in medieval and renaissance societies. Nevertheless, the abolition of the vowed religious life of monks and nuns removed a powerful if often compromised institutional witness to Christian ambivalence about material prosperity, while pulling in the opposite direction, the intractableness of post-reformation religious disagreements contributed to the emergence of societies which found their rationale in purely materialistic and acquisitive values – the protection of property and the contractual guarantee of the rights of the individual. In the pioneering early modern secular states, in particular the Dutch Republic, Gregory argues, men and women decided to stop killing each other over what seemed increasingly irresolvable religious differences, and went shopping instead. In the long run, religion became a private matter, and this privatisation became one of the building blocks of Enlightenment social theory. 'It does me no injury', declared Thomas Jefferson, 'for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.'¹⁴

Readers of Gregory's bracing but highly controversial book could be in no doubt about the abiding topicality of reformation history, though his razor-sharp distinction between the legacy of early modern Catholicism on the one hand (flawed but essentially benign) and that of its Protestant opponents on the other (well-intentioned but ultimately disastrous) is unlikely to command universal assent. The most original modern anglophone historian of the transition from medieval to modern Christianity was also, as

it happens, by origin and education a Roman Catholic, but John Bossy's verdict on the rival confessions which emerged from the reformation conflicts might reasonably be summarised as 'a plague on both your houses'. Bossy's Jesuit education exerted a marked influence on his work long after he had ceased to practise his inherited faith. His best work grew out of a lifelong preoccupation with the context, meaning and social function of the sacraments. He was profoundly influenced by both the work of the French *Annales* school,¹⁵ and by the 'Sociologie Religieuse' practised by Gabriel le Bras and his associates,¹⁶ as also to a lesser extent by a youthful Marxist phase, later fiercely repudiated.

Bossy was bored by conventional political history, with its focus on elites (he once proposed as an examination question in an early modern European history paper, 'Did Charles V matter?') and, for a historian of his time, he was unusually well read in anthropology and sociology. His youthful Catholicism had given him an interest in and insight into the importance and social significance of ritual. His first major (and most substantial) book was a pioneering study of the English Roman Catholic community from the reformation to the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1850. In it, he abandoned a narrative framework to focus on the processes of community formation in rites of passage, in the 'separation of meats and days' involved in the rituals of the Catholic household and in the social shifts from a community dominated and preserved by gentry patronage to the plebeian Catholicism of mid-Victorian England. Bossy's book was at once recognised as a major contribution not only to the history of English Catholicism, but of religious minorities in general. It was instrumental in liberating the study of the history of English Catholicism from a tribal focus on the 'sufferings of our Catholic forefathers', and its integration into the wider social and religious history of the island.¹⁷

Bossy's subtle and imaginative book advanced a consciously provocative thesis. Post-reformation English Catholicism, he argued, was not best understood as a survival of 'the old religion'. Far from being a dwindling remnant of a once universally Catholic population, it must be viewed as a new beginning, 'a small community gradually getting larger'. Membership of the Elizabethan and early Stuart Catholic community had to be assessed on the basis of overtly

separatist behaviour of some sort. The gradual awakening of this new community to the fact of separation was accompanied by the transformation of the college at Douai founded by William Allen in the late 1560s from an academic haven for clerical dons awaiting the return of England to sanity and Catholic communion, into a training house for 'missionaries', dedicated to the perpetuation and expansion of a religious minority. In this awakening, from 'churchly nostalgia' to the practical reality of 'mission', activist Jesuit missionaries played a key role, and Jesuits like Robert Persons were as close as Bossy's book got to heroes. By contrast, too many of the leaders of the secular clergy had, he thought, frittered their energies in pursuit of an antiquarian hierarchical ideal, based on the illusion that they were still the medieval *Ecclesia Anglicana*. This mirage was only set aside in the reign of James II, with the erection of four apostolic vicariates, a pragmatic form of Church government which abandoned claims to continuity with the medieval English Church and recognised the 'missionary' status of England.

That bold scenario was rapidly challenged, and many of its details have not worn well. Bossy's insistence that Elizabethan Catholicism was essentially a new construct was unduly influenced by the work of A. G. Dickens on Yorkshire recusancy, from whom also he took a low estimation of the achievements of the Marian Church. As a bevy of critics led by Christopher Haigh insisted, Bossy radically underestimated the enduring importance of Marian Catholicism and the surviving Marian clergy in the shaping and consolidation of Elizabethan Catholic resistance.¹⁸ Bossy's insistence on overt acts of 'recusancy' as constitutive of membership of the Catholic community, a perception carried over from an older Catholic historiography, was subjected to a diffident but devastating critique in Alexandra Walsham's MA dissertation on Church papistry. Walsham demolished one of Bossy's central contentions by demonstrating the long-term importance to the Catholic community of so-called 'schismatics', non-separating Catholics who on occasion attended services in their local Anglican parish, while retaining their allegiance to and connections within Catholicism.¹⁹ And puzzlingly for a historian whose best work engaged fruitfully with the history of early modern European Catholicism, Bossy failed to connect some of the preoccupations of the English secular clergy that he characterised

as ‘insular’ and archaising, with major strands within the European counter-reformation.²⁰

Nevertheless, Bossy was to build major elements of his argument, suitably refined and transformed, into a broader and more persuasive analysis of the entire reformation era, though, in this new form, Jesuits and other clerical activists were to feature much less flatteringly. Bossy’s masterpiece was *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*, published in 1985,²¹ an exploratory essay in book form which gathered together ideas broached over the previous ten years in a series of brilliant, idea-packed and highly influential articles.²² The central contention of *Christianity in the West* was that medieval Christianity had been fundamentally concerned with the creation and maintenance of peace in a violent world. ‘Christianity’ then had denoted neither an ideology nor an institution, but a community of believers whose religious ideal – constantly aspired to if seldom attained – was peace and mutual love. The sacraments and sacramentals of the medieval Church were concerned to defuse hostility and to create extended networks of fraternity, spiritual ‘kith and kin’, enacting the ‘social miracle’ by reconciling enemies and consolidating the community in charity.

In the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Bossy maintained, all this had changed. In the Renaissance era, reliance on symbol and image gave way to the privileging of the audible or visible word. While peace remained a fundamental Christian aspiration, ritual and sacrament gave way to persuasion and instruction as the means to achieve it. A newly professional breed of intellectuals and activists – the ‘new clerks’ – arose, who understood Christianity not as a community sustained by ritual acts, but a teaching enforced by institutional structures. The framework of moral teaching shifted from focus on the seven deadly sins, understood as wrong because anti-social, sin as malignancy against other people, to a preoccupation with obedience to the Ten Commandments, whose transgression was understood in the first place as an affront to God. Credal orthodoxy replaced *Communitas* as a supreme virtue, Christianity became a system of beliefs and moral behaviours, charity ceased to mean primarily the community-building state of love towards God and neighbour, instead signifying primarily an external act of benevolence to the poor and needy. By 1700 ‘the Christian world was full

of religions, objectives and moral entities characterized by system, principles and hard edges'. Above that multiplicity loomed 'a shadowy abstraction, *the* Christian religion', and somewhere above that was 'religion with a capital R, planted in its new domain by people who did not usually believe in it'.²³

Bossy's bravura essay, crudely summarised here, bristled with ideas and aphorisms, but also with breathtaking generalisations resting on slender empirical evidence. The book excited and infuriated reviewers in more or less equal measure, often simultaneously, not least because the total technical apparatus supporting its sweeping *tour d'horizon* consisted of just 17 footnotes and a handful of almost comically selective bibliographies. Bossy was also accused of romanticism, projecting back into the late Middle Ages a sentimentalised version of post-Vatican II Catholicism.²⁴ And certainly he was attempting to describe what he saw as a decline from a user-friendly popular religion into something harder, more abstract and more managerial. Protestantism was clearly a major factor in the changes he charted, and he titled a crucial chapter on the progress towards abstraction, 'The Institution of Christian Religion', in a reference to Calvin's most famous writing. But he was strikingly even-handed in attributing what he saw as decline equally to forces within as well as beyond institutional Catholicism: Carlo Borromeo featured as prominently as Calvin as one of the new clerks, and there was little to choose, on this account, between Jesuit priest and puritan minister.

The process Bossy traced in *Christianity in the West*, including the perception that 'the two Reformations – Luther's and Rome's – constituted ... two complementary aspects of one and the same process' had, of course, been noted by other historians, if rarely with such beguiling imaginative force. Conceived in narrower political terms, the imposition of orthodox belief and practice, Catholic or Protestant, was part of 'confessionalisation', the evolution and management of religious identities in militantly Catholic or Protestant states. Viewed as part of the evolution of docile civil societies, it could be viewed as the state's imposition of 'social discipline'. Bossy was resistant to such analyses, which he suspected of reductionism. Always alert to nuance, and for all his distaste for the direction which reforming Catholics and Protestants had taken Christianity in early modern Europe, he would probably have baulked, for

example, at the starkness of Robin Briggs's assertion that the counter-reformation 'can be characterized, with only slight exaggeration, as one of the greatest repressive enterprises in European history'.²⁵ In the same way, despite his admiration for the author and his methods, he demurred from Jean Delumeau's characterisation of the early modern transformation of Western Christianity as a process of 'christianisation': medieval Christians, he thought, understood perfectly well what salvation was, and who was their saviour.²⁶

For all its idiosyncrasies and blatant limitations, Bossy's brilliantly intuitive work has proved enormously fruitful. His influence has been pervasive even in fields into which he himself rarely ventured, as here, for example, in Blair Worden's insightfully Bossyesque observations on the nature of Puritanism:

The challenge which Puritanism posed was not to hierarchy but to community. Dividing the world between saints and sinners, mixing only with the former and barring the latter from the Sacraments, the Puritans undermined the clergy's position as a parish conciliation service. It is true they wanted parochial unity – but unity on their terms. Theirs was a different conception of the minister's role from that envisaged for George Herbert's Country Parson, 'reconciling neighbours that are at variance', and charitably indulging, in the hope of correcting, the spiritual failings of weaker brethren.²⁷

The essays which make up this book all, in one way or another, engage with aspects of the transitions in early modern English and Irish Christianity which Bossy mapped. This is a book about the reformation – or, rather, the attempted reformations – of Christian England, and about the divisions among and between those who sought to reform and convert it. The book falls into three distinct sections. The first broaches the theme of religious division and disputation, by considering the career of Thomas More, one of the first and certainly the most notable opponent of England's early Protestant reformers. More's English polemical writings, collected and republished by William Rastell in Queen Mary's reign, became an armoury of arguments drawn on again and again by Marian, Elizabethan and early Stuart controversialists. More appears in

Christianity in the West as a defender of a communitarian understanding of tradition, an expositor of the ‘social miracle’, opposed to the dominance of mere text, whose sophistication neither Protestant opponents like Tyndale nor Catholic admirers like Reginald Pole then or subsequently understood or emulated.²⁸ When Bossy wrote, More’s idealised humanitarian reputation, established by Chambers’ beautiful biography²⁹ and the play and movie Robert Bolt based on it,³⁰ was already being harshly questioned by historians like Geoffrey Elton.³¹ More recently, Hilary Mantel’s brilliant but hostile fictions have ensconced a far more negative image of More in the public imagination. These three chapters therefore attempt to explore and explain More’s vehement opposition to heresy and heretics, and thereby to open the discussion of reformation as a field of contestation, between Catholics and Protestants, but also within the opposing communions, which forms the subject of many of the chapters that follow.

The second section of the book offers a series of studies of Catholicism in England from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. That long time frame is now an established feature of thinking about the counter-reformation, which even in the Catholic heartlands of southern Europe was a long time in the making. In Europe’s northern fringes where varieties of Protestantism were established, it was an even more drawn-out labour.³² Chapters 4 to 6 examine the work of three key figures in the emergence and radicalisation of the post-reformation Catholic community in confrontation with Protestantism. Reginald Pole’s legatine mission to re-Catholicise England in the mid-1550s failed, essentially because of his premature death and, crucially, that of his sovereign, Mary I. Bossy was inclined to be dismissive of the Marian Church and hence of Pole’s achievements.³³ But Pole’s theological legacy remained a potent influence on the development of Elizabethan Catholicism, and the discussion of Pole’s preaching in Chapter 4 supplements the case I have made elsewhere for a more positive assessment of the Marian Catholicising project, and Pole’s part in it.³⁴ Chapter 5 provides an overview of the career and objectives of the single most important leader of Elizabethan Catholicism, and Pole’s successor as ‘the Cardinal of England’, William Allen. Allen’s pastoral vision was central to the progress from church to mission on which Bossy had

laid so much emphasis, but his conspiratorial political entanglements and commitment to re-Catholicisation by force of arms did nothing to moderate the Elizabethan regime's hostility to Catholics.

Chapter 6 considers the work of Allen's most important theological collaborator, Gregory Martin, whose career and writings throw into sharp relief the importance of the wider counter-reformation context of the English mission. In the conflicted history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English Catholicism, loyalty to the idea of Catholic unity round the Pope was a constant, but Rome itself was often viewed as a problem (an issue explored in Chapter 10). For Gregory Martin, however, the Rome of curial and papal management was less significant than the Rome of the mind and imagination, a Rome of saints and martyrs, *Roma Sancta*: this chapter offers a case study of some of the religious sentiments that energised the northern counter-reformation. Chapter 7 explores the devotional ethos of Elizabethan and early Stuart Catholicism by examining the history of its most important devotional book, the *Manual of Devout Prayer*. In the process, it traces both the dependence and independence of the English Catholic community on European resources. Chapter 8 continues this examination of recusant piety and pastoral organisation in their European contexts, arguing that elements which Bossy saw as symptoms of an insular and archaic mindset in fact featured prominently in the pastoral vision of the Italian and French Catholic pioneers of reform and conversion like Borromeo, Bérulle and Vincent de Paul. Chapter 9 offers a detailed account of the bitter early eighteenth-century disputes over Jansenism which seemed to threaten the integrity of the English Catholic community, once again illustrating the extent to which the history of the English mission was inextricably bound up with developments in counter-reformation Europe. The section concludes with a survey of Catholic polemical use of the history of the English reformation to contest the national Protestant narrative, from the writings of Cardinal Pole down to the subtler apologetic of Lingard in the age of Catholic Emancipation.

The book's final section turns from an examination of Catholic attempts at the reform and conversion of England, to consider the work of puritan 'new clerks' to convert the nation to a living and ardent Protestantism. The focus here is on the mid-seventeenth

century, and especially on the ideals and activities of Richard Baxter and his circle. Baxter's vast collection of 'cases of conscience', *The Christian Directory*, a clerical guide to the dilemmas of the Christian life designed for the formation of earnest Protestants, featured prominently in both Weber's discussion of the evolution of the Protestant ethic and in R. H. Tawney's reworking of that theme in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. In *Christianity in the West*, Bossy followed Weber and Tawney in taking Baxter's book as the epitome of the transformation of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, from a living community to a theorised 'religion', from collective to individual Christians, which was the subject of his book.³⁵ In these chapters I attempt to flesh out, I hope somewhat more sympathetically, the pastoral vision which underlay puritan understanding of what the Christian community could and should be. In the process, I examine the issue of the success and failure of Protestant attempts to reform the nation. The book concludes with a study of George Fox, a Protestant activist whose ecstatic and mystical vision of reform led him to reject and seek to overthrow the institutional vision of 'new clerks' like Baxter and his ilk. For Bossy, Fox and the radical milieu out of which Fox emerged formed 'only a footnote to the history of the transformations of Christendom'.³⁶ I hope that Fox's presence at the conclusion of this book as something more than a footnote may be a suitable reminder that the call to inner transformation and conversion has always been in uneasy and sometimes violent tension with the more institutional and ecclesial conceptions of what it is to be Christian, which form the substance of my book.

As should be evident by now, the work of John Bossy has been for me, as for so many other historians of early modern religion, a constant source of surprise, stimulus, inspiration, exasperation and disagreement. Only a few of the chapters of this book engage directly with his ideas, as often as not to qualify or dissent. But almost none of them would have been written without his example, and on occasion, direct encouragement. With some unease, I once sent him an early draft of an article criticising one of the central planks of his argument in *The English Catholic Community*.³⁷ I received in return a long and cordial letter in his inimitably looped and hasty handwriting, beginning 'I think you are *probably* right' and going on to suggest five or six ways in which the critique of his position could

be strengthened and refined. It was entirely characteristic of him. He was a great historian, and a generous friend: this book is dedicated to his memory.

Notes

- 1 The description is Patrick Collinson's, *London Review of Books*, 26 (2004), pp. 22–3.
- 2 A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1965).
- 3 Examples embodying these assumptions are A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth Century Europe* (London, 1966), and H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation in its Own Words* (London 1964); for the designation of Catholic reform, John O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Harvard, 2002).
- 4 Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London 1988).
- 5 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation, Europe's House Divided 1490–1700* (London, 2003). Citations from the Penguin paperback edition of 2004.
- 6 Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World 1450–1650* (New Haven and London, 2016).
- 7 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p. xxii.
- 8 For some reflections on that tradition see chapters 1 and 2 of my *Saints, Sacrilege and Sedition* (London, 2012).
- 9 Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard, 1999).
- 10 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularised Society* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2012); *Assessment of the Medieval Church*, pp. 129–45.
- 11 Jacques Maritain, *Trois Réformateurs* (Paris, 1925). Maritain's three culprits are Luther, Descartes and Rousseau.
- 12 Peter R. Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth, 2002); on Weber, H. Lehmann and G. Roth (eds), *Weber's Protestant Ethic: Origins, Evidence, Contexts* (Cambridge, 1993); Gordon Marshall, *In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism: An Essay on Max Weber's Protestant Ethic* (London, 1982); for Tawney, R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London, 1926) and many subsequent editions; Gary Armstrong and Tim Gray, *The Authentic Tawney: A New Interpretation of the Thought of R. H. Tawney* (Exeter, 2011).
- 13 Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, p. 95 and Chapter 2 *passim*.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 15 André Burguière, *The Annales School: An Intellectual History* (Ithaca, NY, 2009), Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89* (London, 1990); Stuart Clark (ed.), *The Annales School: Critical Assessments* (4 vols, London, 1999).
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PART ONE

Thomas More and Heresy

I

Thomas More and the Strange Death of Erasmian England

In this first part of the book I want to consider Thomas More's role during the late 1520s and early 1530s in the collapse of what one may call the Erasmian moment in early Tudor culture and politics. England in those years saw the flowering, and then the destruction, of a devout and self-consciously orthodox Catholic humanism, propagated by More's circle of friends and intent on the reform of Christendom from within.¹ It was a circle which looked beyond merely English concerns, and which European humanists like the Dutchman Erasmus of Rotterdam and the Spaniard Luis de Vives were significant participants and indeed beneficiaries.²

In the last years of the fifteenth century Erasmus had painfully accumulated the skills and resources which would underpin his life's work. A spell of study at the University of Paris had convinced him of the bankruptcy of the scholastic method which dominated university theology, locked as he considered it to be into sterile theorising and narrow dogmatism.³ As his acquaintance with the classical world grew he came increasingly to see the centrality of Greek for an understanding of early Christianity, and set himself to master the language and literature of classical and early Christian Greece. Erasmus seized eagerly on the still developing technology of the printing press, and over the next 30 years he was to publish a stream of classical and early Christian authors in ground-breaking editions.⁴

A key stimulus to his immersion in Greek was his first visit to England in 1499, under the patronage of the young Henry Blount, Lord Mountjoy, whom he had tutored in Paris. During this visit

Erasmus formed lifelong friendships with More and with John Colet, Dean of St Paul's.⁵ Colet, the wealthy founder of St Paul's School, was an authority on the Greek New Testament, whose Oxford lectures on St Paul, based on the Greek text and saturated in the neo-platonic learning of Renaissance Italy, profoundly influenced Erasmus.⁶ Contact with More, Colet and their circle during this and subsequent visits to England turned Erasmus decisively towards the study of early Christianity, and planted the seed of his great edition of the Greek New Testament, eventually published with a facing Latin translation in 1516. This *Novum Instrumentum*, as it was called, was to prove one of the world's most revolutionary texts, revealing the absence of biblical basis for dominant orthodoxies on the sacrament of confession and related practices like indulgences. Erasmus' *New Testament* would form the basis for the far more drastic reform activities of early Protestant leaders like Luther and Zwingli.

In 1500 Erasmus had issued the first edition of one of his most influential works, the *Adagia*, a small collection of mainly Latin proverbs and sayings, culled from his classical reading, round which he structured a series of commentaries and essays exploring various aspects of classical learning. Erasmus expanded the *Adagia* in each of its many successive editions, till by his death in 1536 it contained more than 4,000 Greek and Latin 'proverbs'.⁷ Some of the component essays, most famously that on 'The Silenus of Alcibiades', were in effect free-standing treatises, expounding Erasmus' intensely ethical and anti-dogmatic religion. In this '*Philosophia Christi*', devotion to and moral imitation of the Jesus of the gospels took precedence over complex theology or external pious practices like fasting, pilgrimage or the monastic life. In 1503 he enshrined these emphases in a devotional handbook for lay people, the *Enchyridion Milites Christiani* (Manual for the Christian Soldier), which, after a slow initial reception, was to become a world bestseller. It ran through more than 70 editions in the course of the sixteenth century, and exerted a profound influence on both sides of the reformation divide.⁸

In 1505 Erasmus and More collaborated on a translation into Latin of a set of dialogues by the scurrilous and bawdy pagan Greek satirist Lucian of Samosata, which they published the following year.⁹ Both men relished Lucian's risqué humour for its own sake. But they also argued that Lucian's ridicule of the follies and superstitions of the

pagan world had urgent contemporary relevance, and applied just as well to superstitious Christians who, in More's words, swallowed 'feigned . . . stories about a saint or horrendous tales of hell', rather than testing them by 'divinely inspired scripture' and the authentic teaching of Christ.

This collaboration, minor in itself, was to prove momentous. Both More and Erasmus would continue to deploy literary strategies derived from Lucian in some of their major works. More's *Utopia* (seen through the Parisian press by Erasmus in 1516), and Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*, were both exercises in Lucianic wit, composed with a deadly serious reforming purpose. So too were the satiric dialogues, or *Colloquies*, of the 1520s, in which Erasmus would continue to lash the abuses and absurdities of the contemporary Church.

According to Erasmus *The Praise of Folly* was begun to while away the hours on horseback as he returned from a prolonged visit to Italy. It was completed during a week's stay in Thomas More's house in Bucklesbury Street, in the City of London, where Erasmus was recuperating from a kidney infection, and the book was intended as a public testimony to the two men's friendship. The Latin title of the work, '*Enconium Moriae*', means literally 'praise of folly', but was also a joking play on More's name (More frequently used the same pun to present himself, ironically, as foolish or dim-witted). The book even tells an anecdote about 'someone of (Folly's) name', a joker who presented his young wife with glass beads which he claimed were priceless jewels. The story is clearly about More himself, who relished practical jokes of this kind.¹⁰

Erasmus had gone to Italy to pursue his Greek studies, and was befriended by many cardinals and prelates. But he also saw at first hand the secular ambition of the Renaissance papacy and its court at its most blatant. He was in Bologna in November 1507 when Pope Julius II rode in at the head of his own army to take possession of the city. So both Erasmus' immersion in the Greek classics, and his disgust at the worldliness of the Church, dominate *The Praise of Folly*. The book is a Lucianic satire, a declamation in which Folly herself speaks, clothed in cap and bells and flaunting her foolish femininity (Erasmus, like More, was prone to misogyny). Folly rules everywhere, in the schoolroom, the church, the council chamber, the universities, the courts of law.

In the early and more generalised part of the book *Folly* is a comedian, portrayed as amused and indulgent towards human foibles. But in dealing with his own times, Erasmus' fictional mask slips, the humour fades, the satire sharpens and darkens, and we increasingly hear Erasmus' own voice, lashing in all earnestness the abuses of his own times, above all abuses in the Church. Go to church and see snoring congregations ignore the wisest and soberest preaching, but leap to rapt attention when some silly superstitious legend is recounted. Theologians lose themselves in mad complexities, obscuring the radical simplicity of the gospel with useless learning. The Apostles consecrated the Eucharist devoutly, but knew nothing of the doctrine of transubstantiation, they knew and revered the Virgin Mary personally, but 'which of them proved how she had been kept immaculate from Adam's sin, with the logic our theologians display'? Those so-called 'experts', who pride themselves on their theological subtleties, have never taken the time to read even once through the gospels or the epistles of St Paul, where they would find a simpler and more radical message.¹¹

Some of *Folly's* most savage religious criticism was levelled at monks and monasteries, as Erasmus gave free rein to his disgust and regret at his own earlier vocation. Monks were sunk in 'filth and ignorance', universally despised, priding themselves for thinking that the 'highest form of piety is to be so uneducated that they can't even read'. They substitute 'petty ceremonies' and burdensome rules for the deeper demands of the gospel. Popes, cardinals, and bishops too abuse the gospel in their pursuit of wealth and power, although their predecessors the Apostles were all poor men. With Julius II's warrior papacy in mind, Erasmus insists that, had they a grain of the salt of the gospel in them, popes and prelates would exchange their wealth, pomp and pleasures for 'vigils, fasts, tears, prayers, sermons, study, sighs and a thousand . . . hardships', instead of which, 'they leave everything, to devote themselves to war'.¹²

The final part of Erasmus' book struck a new and more intensely religious note, as Erasmus expounded the paradoxes of human and divine folly. Drawing on a tradition of Christianised Platonic mysticism encountered in the writings of the Greek Fathers, especially Origen, Erasmus portrayed the folly of the gospel as a kind of entry into divine madness, which takes the faithful soul beyond human

reason into realms of the spirit no human wisdom can encompass. The deepest Christianity is of the heart, and beyond all rationalising. The gospel was revealed first to the simple and humble, to women and children, and the founders of the faith were lovers of simplicity, bitter enemies of learning. The happiness which Christians seek 'is nothing other than a kind of madness and folly', a spiritual repudiation of worldly values which makes no sense to the ungodly. Plato taught that the madness of lovers was the highest kind of happiness, and true religion is likewise a kind of crazy passion. The soul lost in God is truly 'beside itself', and those who taste mystic union with God can speak of it only incoherently: 'they lament their return to reason, for all they ever want is to be mad forever with this kind of madness'.¹³

The religious vision of *The Praise of Folly* was soon to be overtaken by events. Erasmus' satire against the abuses of institutional Christianity would be eagerly taken up by reformers like Luther, whose momentous attack on Indulgences in 1517 echoed many Erasmian themes. But Luther and his followers pushed the call to reform far beyond anything Erasmus had envisaged or could accept. His insistence on the primacy of the original text of the Bible became in their hands an insistence on the authority of *sola scriptura*, scripture alone, which challenged the doctrinal authority of the community of the Church. Erasmus was a passionate believer in order, and saw the unity of the Church as a sacrament of the unity God willed for the human race. A lover of peace, indeed a convinced pacifist, he watched in horror as religious disagreements became the cause of bloody warfare, and tore Christendom apart. Like the Protestant reformers he despised contemporary monasticism, and he sympathised with many of their positive emphases. But he saw in the Protestant rejection of Catholic teaching, and their desecration of sacred objects and buildings, a new and destructive kind of dogmatism, worse than those he had lampooned in the medieval Church.

Erasmus was not, however, deflected from his life's mission. Doggedly he went on editing the texts of early Christianity as a remedy for the ills of the modern Church. As religious divisions polarised and men increasingly took sides, Erasmus went on criticising abuse impartially wherever he saw it. In the mid-1520s he made clear his basic Catholic loyalties by attacking Luther's teaching on

justification by faith alone, and on predestination.¹⁴ In those same years, however, he published a series of satiric *Colloquies*, dialogues in the manner of Lucian, devastatingly lampooning Catholic abuses in institutions like fasting or pilgrimage.¹⁵

As we shall see, by the early 1530s, More by contrast may have had some regrets about his own early critical utterances about religion. But however evil the times, Erasmus had no such regrets. His Latin motto was *Cedo nulli*, 'I yield to no one', and he chose to die as he had lived, a Catholic priest. But in an age of violent dogmatism, retraction and second thoughts, he refused to be deflected from the path he had chosen as a young and eagerly reforming scholar. Unsurprisingly, both sides came to see him as a traitor. Protestants denounced his cowardice in not following his convictions into the reformed camp. Catholics blamed him for having 'laid the egg that Luther hatched'. The theologians of the Sorbonne got their revenge for his relentless polemic against scholasticism by condemning *The Praise of Folly* in 1527 and again in 1533: a series of sixteenth-century popes – Paul IV, Sixtus V, Clement VIII – followed suit. The book was also banned by the governments of some of the most powerful Catholic states – Milan and Venice, Portugal and Spain. After the Council of Trent, all Erasmus' writings were placed on the *Index of Forbidden Books*. *The Praise of Folly*, which had been translated into the major European languages and had run through 36 Latin editions before Erasmus' death in 1536, survived thereafter mainly in Protestant editions, in England, Switzerland and the Netherlands.¹⁶

More had achieved his own European celebrity as the author of *Utopia*, a short fictional dialogue in Latin, in two parts, published in December 1516.¹⁷ The intriguing title 'Utopia' was a punning Greek word, which can mean both 'nowhere' and 'good place'. Travel and discovery were in the air: Amerigo Vespucci's voyages to the New World had been publicised a decade before, and More's fantasy purported to be an eyewitness account of an island somewhere in the South Atlantic, by one of Vespucci's companions, Raphael Hythloday. The little book immediately became an international bestseller, and it made More a literary superstar.

Utopia was a dream commonwealth ruled by elected officials, its population rationally distributed among 54 cities with identical street plans. No one was poor because goods were held in common

and wealth despised. Gold and silver were made into pisspots, jewels given to children as toys, and there was no money. In Utopia there were no aristocrats and no idlers. Everyone dressed simply, everyone learned a trade and worked for a living. The citizens dined together at communal tables, the sick and elderly were cared for in spacious hospitals, capital punishment was a rarity reserved for the gravest crimes, war avoided as a calamity of last resort and hunting for sport despised as cruel. The religion of the Utopians was a rational paganism. Religious disagreement was tolerated, though all accepted that the world was governed by a benevolent God who rewarded virtue and punished vice; those who denied this were viewed as criminals whose opinions threatened moral anarchy. Priests in Utopia were universally respected, because there were very few of them, and all were chosen for their wisdom and virtue.

Like *The Praise of Folly*, *Utopia* was of course a satire on the real Europe and, more specifically, the real England, in which government was harsh, priests and rulers often corrupt and the gulf between rich and poor wider every day. But not everything in *Utopia* represented More's ideal alternative. The regimented life of the island is sometimes horribly reminiscent of an anthill, and Utopians sanctioned assisted suicide for the terminally ill, which More, a devout Catholic, certainly rejected. His book is a thought experiment, whose ideas are voiced wittily by the characters, making it hard for us to know where playfulness stops and serious advocacy begins.¹⁸

Between 1516 and 1519 most of More's literary activity was dedicated to the defence of Erasmus' edition of the New Testament against a phalanx of English and European critics. His open letters to the humanistically trained Louvain theologian Martin Dorp, to the University of Oxford, to the future Archbishop of York Edward Lee and to an anonymous monk of the Charterhouse, aligned More unequivocally with the movement for the reform of the Catholic Church by a return 'ad fontes', to the ancient sources, above all to Scripture and the Fathers, for which Erasmus was the chief spokesman.¹⁹ These humanist tracts are notable for their Erasmian contempt for the aridities of university scholastic theology, and their ardent defence of Erasmus' biblical and patristic work, which, More claimed, does 'more fruitful work for the Church in one month' than all his opponents have done in many years.²⁰ From 1521, however,

More switched his literary activity to the fight against heresy as one of the leaders of Henry VIII's campaign against Luther.²¹ He was one of the advisers and perhaps ghost writers of Henry's *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. In 1523, with the King's encouragement, More published pseudonymously a virulently abusive Latin '*Responsio ad Lutherum*', an extended rhetorical exercise in the form of a diatribe, which pressed humanistic learning into polemical use, drawing on classical models from Lucian, Horace and Juvenal to ridicule, insult and excoriate Luther and his errors.²²

But More himself came to place a higher value on the remarkable stream of English works which seemed to gush from his pen in the five years leading up to his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower. Ironically, these works are nowadays read, if at all, mainly as evidence that More was losing his grip. They form a remarkable series – *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and *The Supplication of Souls*, in June and September 1529 respectively; then the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (Part 1, the Preface and Books I–III published in January 1532, and Part 2, Books IV–VIII, more than a year later, after his resignation as Chancellor). That same year, 1533, saw the last four in this astonishing polemical outpouring, in rapid succession the *Apology of Sir Thomas More*, the *Debellation of Salem and Byzance*, the *Answer to a Poisoned Book* and the *Letter Against Frith*.²³ Though these books were directed against a variety of authors, More's main target, implicit even in writings ostensibly directed against others, was the Bible translator and controversialist William Tyndale.²⁴ There was an irony in this: More's scathing dismissal of university theology in the *Letter to a Monk*, with the observation that 'young girls once understood what today's proud professors cannot' has some affinity with Tyndale's vow that by his Bible translation '*I wyl cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture, than [the pope]*'.²⁵ But More viewed Tyndale as the most important conduit for Lutheran ideas into England, and he saw in Tyndale's version of the New Testament the fountainhead from which lesser minds drew lethal draughts of error with which to poison the souls of unsuspecting English men and women. It is not too much to say that More *hated* heresy, and the actions issuing from that hatred have posed a problem which has dogged modern discussion of More's career, from Chambers' valiant attempt to exculpate it as in fact a fear of sedition,

to more recent excoriations by Hilary Mantel. It already posed a problem for his earliest editors and biographers, which they dealt with by suppressing it.

At 3 p.m. on 16 May 1532 in the garden of York Place near Westminster Hall, Thomas More delivered the Great Seal of England in its white leather bag into the hands of Henry VIII, and thereby resigned as Lord Chancellor: his public career was at an end.²⁶ The immediate trigger for More's resignation was the Submission of the Clergy to the Royal Supremacy just the day before. More's abandonment of office represented his recognition that he had lost the political battle he had been fighting since 1529 to hold the King to the defence of the Church, her clergy and her doctrines, for which Pope Leo X had granted Henry the title 'Defender of the Faith' ten years before.

More had been England's most determined and highest profile public champion of orthodoxy since the publication of his *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in 1529.²⁷ The *Dialogue*, the outcome of a commission by More's bishop, Cuthbert Tunstall, was merely the first and best of the remarkable stream of books – more than a million words in all – which More produced over the next four years in defence of the Catholic faith – and of himself. It would continue with the *Supplication of Souls*, the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, the *Letter Against Frith*, the *Apology of Sir Thomas More*, the *Deballation of Salem and Byzance* and the *Answer to a Poisoned Book*.

This immense literary and intellectual investment by More, a mountain of words heaped up in hours snatched from his political and public commitments, has, I suspect, often been dismissed largely unread. Certainly, in terms of literary appraisal we have advanced very little if at all beyond the assessment offered by C. S. Lewis more than half a century ago.²⁸ Lewis thought well of the art of *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and a generation later Brendan Bradshaw, from a different perspective, made a persuasive case for the *Dialogue's* coherence and polemical force.²⁹ More recently, it has attracted sympathetic attention from a number of literary scholars and historians, notably Tom Betteridge.³⁰ But even in these days of industrial scale academic production on More and his milieu, there is surprisingly little detailed attention to the rest of the vast bulk of More's polemical writing. Even the editors of the Yale editions of

the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* and the *Debellation of Salem and Byzance* did not venture to recommend them as a good read, and the widespread assumption that they are in fact unreadable has inhibited serious engagement with them.

Attention has turned, instead, to More's *actions* against heresy. Richard Marius, deploring More's writings against heresy, 'pages now seldom read and often embarrassing to those who love More', saw More's polemical works as 'emblems of his helplessness before events. He wrote because he could do nothing else.'³¹ This sounds as if it ought to be a rather illuminating remark, but in fact it's not quite right. At least while he was writing the *Dialogue*, the *Supplication* and the first half of the *Confutation*, More was anything but helpless. Even as he generated this torrent of words, More was busily engaged as the Crown's chief law officer in devastatingly practical action against error. He was pushing his legal powers as Chancellor to the limit in a crack-down on the possession and circulation of heretical books, initiating a series of proclamations, nocturnal raids and confiscations. Somewhat less spectacularly but much more controversially, both then and since, he was arresting the heretics themselves. As a layman and secular law official, of course, More never himself presided as judge in a heresy trial, but he was instrumental in stirring bishops to action, and he himself was responsible for the arrest, imprisonment and interrogation of several doctrinal deviants who were subsequently condemned by their ordinaries and executed. These included James Bainham, John Tewkesbury and Richard Bayfield.³²

Thus More's involvement in the campaign against heresy took on a new and unErasmian intensity with his elevation to the Lord Chancellorship in late October 1529. As Chancellor, More felt a special responsibility, since heresy undermined ancient law, custom and morality and threatened 'the final subversion and desolation of this noble realm'.³³ The proclamation of 1530 which More probably drafted underlined the King's detestation of the 'malicious and wicked sects of heretics and Lollards' who by perverting scripture and inducing error, 'soweth sedition among Christian people, and . . . do disturb the peace and tranquillity of Christian realms, as late happened in some parts of Germany, where by the procurement and sedition of Martin Luther and other heretics were slain an infinite number of Christian people'. The proclamation called on

civil officials, from the Chancellor himself down to the justices of the peace, to 'give their whole power and diligence to put away and to make utterly to cease and destroy all manner of heresies and errors'.³⁴ And so the pace of the London campaign against the underground book trade intensified. Several suspects were imprisoned and examined by More in his own house at Chelsea, and evidence collected by him was instrumental in securing the condemnation of three of the six heretics burned while he was Chancellor.³⁵

Inevitably, the rumour mill got to work: allegations of torture circulated. More categorically and in detail denied all such allegations in the *Apology*,³⁶ but with John Foxe's help they persisted, reiterated in our time in Hilary Mantel's hostile portrayal of 'our friend in Chelsea', which looks like becoming the authorised portrait of More. For a generation this hostile take on More on heresy has been underpinned by elaborate psycho-sexual speculation about More himself. In a famous character sketch of More in a letter of 1519 to Ulrich von Hutten, Erasmus remarked that More had seriously considered a vocation to the priesthood or monastic life.³⁷ Discovering in himself, however, a strong attraction to women, he had opted instead for marriage, holding that it was better to be a good husband than a bad priest. On this flimsy base, modern interpreters of More have erected – the phrase is emphatically the *mot juste* – a theory that More's dealings with heresy were dogged by his own unresolved sexual problems, and that his writings about heresy are therefore obsessive, hysterical and increasingly uncontrolled. Sir Geoffrey Elton set the pattern with a series of debunking essays spread over 30 years, in which he argued that More had spent four 'idiot years'³⁸ trying to be a monk of the Charterhouse, and, having opted instead for marriage, spent the rest of his life struggling with a sense of failure. Elton's More was a repressed 'sex maniac', unable to shake off the conviction 'that he had failed to live up to what he regarded as God's ultimate demand on man', namely, celibacy. This, for Elton, was the explanation not only of what he considered More's morbid self-flagellation and hair shirt, but also of the tone of More's writings against the reformation, 'endless, nearly always tedious, passionate, devoid of humour and markedly obsessive', a display of 'helpless fury' rooted in More's own misanthropic pessimism, and above all in his unresolved and morbid sexuality.³⁹

This psycho-sexual fantasy of the guilt-ridden failed monk was elaborated by the literary historian Alistair Fox in 1982 as the interpretative key to all More's English writings up to his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower. For Fox, More's controversial writings conceal an inner experience 'which . . . threatened to destroy his sense of providence and . . . eventually brought him close to despair'. In them we find 'a pattern of progressive deterioration: dialogue gives way to debellation, self-control yields to loss of proportion and perspective, candour is replaced by dishonesty'. More's 'snarling invective' and 'polemical ferocity' display 'an almost demoniac emotional violence towards his opponents', a 'vileness of sentiment', which he thinks went far beyond sixteenth-century convention, a sustained act of morbid compensation, to assuage his own guilt at not being a monk.⁴⁰

There is a great deal of anachronism in such concerns. The ferocious language of More's polemical works, for example, both in Latin and in English, needs re-insertion into the rhetorical conventions of humanist writing.⁴¹ But historians, literary critics, novelists and dramatists alike have professed revulsion from the bulk, vehemence and apparent lack of literary control in those writings, and have related their distaste to the apparent self-betrayal of More's actions. And the involvement of one of Europe's greatest humanist writers in a sometimes lethal campaign of repression, censorship and book-burning, and in the arrest and interrogation of suspects, has led historians to see More in the late 1520s and early 1530s as driven by a murderous panic about heresy rooted less in objective reality than in his own psychosexual pathology.

This is a familiar line of argument, according to which More, in the early 1530s, was 'a cruelly divided man', experiencing, in Alistair Fox's words, 'changes in his personality that threatened to destroy much of what was most attractive and admirable in him'.⁴² This alleged deterioration explains, such writers suggest, the evident gulf in sensibility between the persecuting Chancellor with his hysterical and undisciplined anti-heretical outpourings, and the creator of *Utopia*, who only 15 years earlier had created that luminous fiction celebrating a rational commonwealth in which all religions were tolerated, where it was recognised that no one could be coerced into belief, and where even the most deviant opinions might be

freely debated in private, provided those who held them did not air them in public or disturb the common people. In a judicious and fair-minded assessment of More's anti-heretical writings and actions in 2000, John Guy recognised that More undertook his polemical and repressive activities initially at least at the behest of others – Bishop Tunstall and, with supreme irony, Henry VIII. But he too finds in More's dealing with heresy a fundamental contradiction: More's language about heresy is, according to Guy, 'too severe', and 'the schizophrenia created by More's dual role as author of *Utopia* and inquisitor in heresy cases will never be dispelled'.⁴³

I don't myself subscribe to this theory of schizophrenia between the humanist More and the persecuting and polemical Chancellor, and in Chapters Two and Three I will argue in detail for the formidable coherence and effectiveness of the key anti-heretical writings, including even the immense and repetitious *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*.⁴⁴ More was indeed more urgent in action and more vehement in debate in the early 1530s. This, however, was not because he was having a nervous breakdown or being untrue to himself, but because the state of the world demanded vigorous action and urgency. By 1529 More was not the only rational man in Europe who believed that the Protestant reformation threatened the intellectual and moral coherence of Christendom as he (and for that matter Erasmus) understood it. And the intellectual foundations for the urgency of the 1530s are already there in his early humanist writings. *Utopia* is a portrait of a world before revelation, where rational debate about religious truth is essential, precisely because it is doomed to perpetual inconclusiveness. Dogmatism about religious truth is of course inappropriate in a world with no objective means of discovering where the truth might lie. But even the Utopians did not tolerate just anything: King Utopus, you may recall, allowed liberty of conscience in matters of religion, but 'By way of exception, he conscientiously and strictly gave injunction that no one should fall so far below the dignity of human nature as to believe that souls likewise perish with the body or that the world is the mere sport of chance and not governed by any divine providence'.⁴⁵

Specifically, the Utopians insisted that 'After this life, accordingly, vices are ordained to be punished and virtue rewarded'. This reward of virtue was fundamental to rational society, so that 'if anyone thinks

otherwise, they do not regard him even as a member of mankind, seeing that he has lowered the lofty nature of his soul to the level of a beast's body – so far are they from classing him among their citizens whose laws and customs he would treat as worthless if it were not for fear'.⁴⁶

In other words, More's Utopian pagans believed that rational virtue was what marked mankind off from the rest of the animals, and no society could survive without an underlying belief in a divine providence. This belief manifested itself in the exercise of moral freedom shaped by a conviction that God would reward virtue and punish vice. And More, in common with most contemporary defenders of Catholicism, came to believe that Luther's denial of the place of good works and merit as conditions of salvation had precipitated precisely such a descent into bestial irrationality and social chaos. By their fruits ye shall know them. More's polemical vehemence was rooted in an appalled perception of the state of contemporary Europe in the grip of a heresy which he feared would 'frame this realme after the fassyon of Swycherlande or Saxony and some other partes of Germany where theyr secte hath alredey fordone the fayth / pulled downe the chyrches / polluted the temples / put out and spoyled all good relygyous folke / ioyned freres and nonnes togyther in lechery / despyted all sayntes / blasphemed oure blessyd lady / caste downe Crystes crosse / throwne out the blessyd sacrament / refused all good lawes / abhorred all good governaunce / rebelled agaynste all rulers fall to fyght amonge them selfe / and so many thousands slayne / that the lande lyeth in many places in maner deserte and desolate'.⁴⁷

The key to this gloomy assessment of the consequences of Protestant teaching has more often than not been looked for in More's own degenerating psychological state. His vehemence and growing pessimism have been taken as a sign of psychic disturbance, rooted in self-loathing because of his choice of marriage over celibacy, a diagnosis based, to put it mildly, on the flimsiest of evidence. And there is no need for Freudian speculation to account for More's loathing of heresy, since almost everything in More on the subject can be paralleled in the writings of European contacts like Eck and Cochlaeus, who were equally apocalyptic. Both the general line of argument and the rhetorical pitch of passages like the one just

quoted are typical of orthodox anti-Lutheran polemic. Five years before More wrote that passage, the German Catholic pamphleteer Simon Blich had declaimed in much the same tones in his *Shame and Desolation of the Nation and its People*:

A runaway monk has turned everything upside down . . . Pious virgin nuns have become whores, devout monks wicked carnal and unchaste men, and good Christians evil heretical dogs . . . the people's deep devotion has been destroyed; instead of good works are base carnality; for freedom of the spirit, the freedom of the flesh; for love of God, hatred of neighbour; for moderation, eating, drinking and feasting . . .

and so on.⁴⁸

The Peasants' War in 1525 seemed to clinch decisively these alleged links between Protestantism and social chaos, and More's writing directly reflects this. But heresy brought more than disobedience and war: Luther's teaching on predestination seemed to More, as to other defenders of orthodoxy from Erasmus to Blich, an attack on the very roots of rational virtue. Luther, More believed, undermined the ethical framework of the Christian life as the Church had taught and practised it for a millennium and a half, and in effect denied the goodness of God himself by making him an arbitrary tyrant:

finally that most abhomynable is of all / of all theyr owne ungracyouse dedes lay the faute in god / taking away the lybertye of mannes wyll / ascrybyng all our dedes to destiny . . . whereby they take away all dyligence and good endeavour to vertue / all wythstandyng and stryvyng agaynst vyce / all care of hevyn / all fere of hell / all cause of prayer / all desyre of devocyon / all exhortacyon to good / all dehortacyon from evyll / all prayse of welldoing / all rebuke of syn / all the lawes of the worlde / all reason among men / set all wretchednesse a broche / no man at lybertye / and yet every man do what he wyll / calling it not his wyll but his desteny / layng theyr syn to goddes ordenaunce / and theyr punysshment to goddes crueltye / and fynally turning the nature of man in to worse than a beste / and the goodness of god in to worse than the devyll . . .⁴⁹

Here was the sufficient cause of all More's urgency, for he was convinced that a descent into chaos like that afflicting Germany awaited England, too, unless the spreading poison of heresy was halted: 'all this good frute wold a few myschevous persons / some for desire of a large lybertye to an unbrydeled lewdness / and some of an hye devylesshe pryde clokod under preteuxe of good zele and symplenes / undoubtedly bring in to thys realme / yf the prynce and prelates and the good faythfull people dyd not in the begynnyng mete with theyr malyce'.⁵⁰

It would be possible, of course, to see in More's highly charged language a morbid overreaction. Protestantism had borne other fruits than warfare and iconoclasm, though you might never think so when reading More. But it bears reiterating that the links More made between heresy, rebellion and social breakdown were entirely conventional – Cochlaeus attributed the peasants' war to Luther just as he attributed the Hussite Wars to Wyclif. To dismiss More's fears as idiosyncratically alarmist or disproportionate is reminiscent of the way in which Churchill's opponents represented his anti-appeasement speeches in the 1930s as hysterical posturing. Time proved Churchill right, however, as, arguably, it vindicated More also, for within three years of More's execution Henry would indeed have 'put out and spoyled all good relygyous folke'. Within ten years, Henry's son would have 'ioyned freres and nonnes togyther in lechery / despyted all sayntes / blasphemed oure blessyd lady / caste downe Crystes crosse / [and] throwne out the blessyd sacrament'. More's apocalyptic vision had become sober reality, not hysteria, but history.

It needs to be emphasised that in itself More's turn to polemic had nothing in it that could be considered intrinsically unErasmian: the refutation of heresy had been a minor but definite element in More's humanist writings in support of Erasmus, many of the humanist clergy favoured by the Cardinal and the court were active in the campaign against the reformation after 1521, and after a good deal of shilly-shallying even Erasmus had entered the lists against Luther's teaching on Justification and free will in 1526.

There's no denying, of course, that More took a savagely negative view of the Reformation. For More, all heresy was inspired by demonic pride: it was a refusal to obey God, which took the form of the rejection of the manifest faith of the Church, 'the comen

well-known bylefe of the comen known catholyke chyrche of all chrysten people / such fayth as by your selfe, and your fathers, and your grandfathers, you have knowen to be byleved',⁵¹ 'preferryng theyr owne fonde gloses against the old connyng and blessyd fathers interpretacyons'.⁵² The heretic always rejected legitimate spiritual authority, 'boldely and stubbornly defending that syth they had connyng to preche they were by god bounden to preche. And that no man nor no lawe was made or coulde be made that had any authoryte to forbade them'.⁵³ This spiritual sedition, More thought, invariably issued in social breakdown, and heresy was always a solvent which fatally loosened the bonds of civil society. More returned time and again to this theme to justify his pursuit of heresy. 'Prynces and people have been constrained to punyssh heresy by terryble deth', he wrote in 1529, because bitter experience has shown that 'outrages and myscheves' invariably 'follow upon suche sectes and heresy'.⁵⁴ Heresy was primarily a crime against God, and for that reason alone intrinsically worthy of punishment. Yet for mercy's sake Christian people might have left the heretics to their errors, were it not for the fact that heresy was always seditious and destructive – 'while they forbore violence / there was little vyolence done to theym'.⁵⁵

We may recall here that obnoxious opinions were only permitted in Utopia provided they were not preached to the common people. In the real world, however, error, puffed up with pride, was always proselytising. As More wrote in his *Apology* in 1533, 'heretykes wyll be doing'.⁵⁶ So it had been in Africa under the Donatists, in Greece under the Arians, in Bohemia under the Hussites. England had found this in the reign of Richard II, when the heretics were at first 'by many men wynked at, and almost by all folk forslouthed'. Free to 'spred theyr heresies about fro shyre to shyre and fro dyocise to dyocise', at last 'the heretykes were growen unto such number, corage and boldness' that they conspired 'not only the abolycyon of the fayth, and spoylyng of the spyrytualtye, but also the destruccyon of the kyng . . . with a playne subversyon and overturning of the state of hys hole realme'. This Oldcastle's rebellion made clear, and this was the inevitable course of all heresy, which was always intrinsically seditious.⁵⁷ And so it was in More's own times: if only the authorities in Germany and Switzerland had enforced their heresy laws at the outset of Luther's revolt, 'the matter hadde not there gone

out at length to suche an ungracyouse endynge'.⁵⁸ Even the heretics themselves had come to realise the need to suppress error and in Germany, contrary to their own initial self-protective teaching on the sinfulness of the use of force in matters of faith, the Protestants sects were now locked in internecine war, and 'tone dreve tother to ruynes. For never shall that cuntrie long abyde without debate and ruffle / where scysmes and factyouse hereses are suffered a while to grow'.⁵⁹

Even at the height of his early defence of Erasmus against his critics More had been convinced that heretics were often impervious to argument, 'more intimidated by one little bundle of faggots than daunted by great bundles of syllogisms'.⁶⁰ More's later dedication to the fight against heresy in the 1520s and 1530s was informed by an urgent sense that Catholic England had become dangerously complacent. The heretics were few, but they were fervent, 'so besyly walkynge that in every ale house, in every taverne, in every barne, and almost every bote, as few they be a man shall alwaye fynde some'. Compared to the apathy of the orthodox, their zeal was 'as gret a difference, as bytwene frost and fyre'. The lazy tolerance by which heretics were indulgently 'suffred boldly to talk unchecked' gave error a foothold which would be ruthlessly exploited by the heretics. This was potentially a fatal negligence, for 'yf they thought theym selfe able to mete and matche the catholykes / they wolde not I wene lye styll in reste thre dayes'. Christ had promised that the gates of hell would never prevail against the Church, but that did not mean that individual local churches might not be overwhelmed by error. 'For as the see shal never surround and overwhelme all the lande . . . yet hath it eaten many places in, and swallowed hole countries uppe'.⁶¹

This was the double rationale which More offered for his pursuit of heresy from the mid-1520s onwards. He was defending the common faith against the pride of those who would give the simple people poison in place of bread, and he was defending the commonwealth against those whose divisiveness would inevitably bring chaos and ruin. As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster he was a key member of the commission for the suppression of heretical books established by Wolsey: in that capacity in 1526 More headed a series of spectacular raids on the Steelyards, the German mercantile colony which

was one of the main channels for the importation of Lutheran books into London. And when, at the request of Cuthbert Tunstall, he began his English writings against heresy in 1529, he deliberately paraded his status as a Crown official. The title pages of *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and the *Supplication of Souls* proclaimed the author 'one of the privy counsayll of our soverayne lorde the kyng and Chancellour of hys duchy of Lancaster'. The second edition of the *Dialogue* and the first part of the *Confutation* announced More's elevation as Lord Chancellor. That official role as defender of the truths which bound Christian society together is insisted on in the *Confutation*. The King himself had shown his devotion to Catholic truth in the *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, and in the enforcement of a legal ban on 'those pernycyouse poysened books'. And so, 'seyng the kynges graciously purpose in thys poynt: I reken that beyng hys unworthy chancellour, it apperteyneth . . . unto my parte and dewty, to folow the ensample of hys noble grace'. It was therefore his duty to persuade those in error to turn from their heresies or 'yf it happily be incurable, then to the clene cuttynge out the parte for infeccon of the remnaunt: am I by myne office in vertue of myne othe, and every officer of iustyce thorow the realme for his rate, right especially bounden . . .'⁶²

By the time he wrote that passage in the spring of 1532, More was painfully aware that the King's earlier proactive opposition to heresy had been radically compromised by Henry's need to rally support from whatever quarter for the Divorce question. Within weeks of the publication of Part One of the *Confutation*, the King had asserted his supremacy over the Church, and More had resigned the Chancellorship. In 1533 he would defend both his own integrity and the fundamental principle of the legal pursuit and capital punishment of stubborn heretics in the second part of the *Confutation*, in his *Apology*, and in the *Debellation of Salem and Byzance*. This last was an attack on an anti-clerical tract by the lawyer Christopher St Germain, though More knew perfectly well that the author was articulating the regime's growing hostility to Church and clergy. In these books, therefore, More was fighting an increasingly fraught rearguard action to persuade the political elite of the continuing and urgent need to combat heresy. Without openly blaming the King he had to demonstrate how the escalating and officially fostered

anti-clericalism played into the hands of the ‘new broached brethren’ and their poisonous doctrines. This involved the author of *Utopia* arguing against what he viewed as a specious and sentimental humanitarianism, which portrayed the use of force against religious deviance as inhumane or unnecessary. But more specifically, it also involved defending his own record as a pursuivant, interrogator and polemicist. More needed to rebut allegations of personal vindictiveness and the use of torture in his official pursuit of heretics, and of abusiveness in his controversial writing. That is the context for his well-known disclaimer of personal animus in the *Apology*, ‘As touchynge heretykes, I hate that vyce of theirs and not theyr persones / and very fayne wolde I that the tone were destroyed, and tother saved.’⁶³

To repeat, then, in these works More was thrown onto the defensive about his anti-heretical activities, forced to justify both the principle of persecution, and his own record as a persecutor. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that More should continue in these late writings to present himself as a hammer of heretics, not merely defending or mitigating his proceedings, but actually emphasising his dedication to the fight against deviant doctrines and deviant doctors. This aspect of More’s vernacular writings has not I think been adequately recognised. From *Utopia* onwards, all of More’s best public writings involve the creation of one or more dramatic personae. It’s often been noted that his three best books, *Utopia*, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and the *Dialogue of Comfort* all take the form precisely of dialogues, in the first two of which a fictionalised More himself plays a leading – or should one say a misleading – role. But in all his anti-heretical English works, More uses these personifications to force the reader’s attention to More’s own actual agency in the struggle against Protestant error. Notoriously, this concern manifested itself in savage asides which make clear More’s own loathing of heresy and of heretics, ‘the devils stinking martyrs, well worthy to be burned’. More soberly, as we have seen, More was concerned to present his own activities as an expression of royal policy, a response to the lead given by the King as Defender of the Faith. He was also concerned to play the experience card, to document his claim that all heretics were driven by malice and the desire to deceive, from his extensive personal acquaintance with the culprits, and to set