POPULAR RELIGION IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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POPULAR RELIGION IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

HOLDING THEIR PEACE

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For Margaret Spufford and Patrick Collinson

How came it to pass that you were so ready to distroy and spoil the thing that you thought well of?

> Question put to a man who, in the mid-sixteenth century, had participated in the despoiling of Roche Abbey in Yorkshire (British Library Add. MS 5813, reproduced in A. G. Dickens (ed.), Tudor Treatises, Yorkshire Archaeological Society (1959) p. 125)

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INTRODUCTION

Two Snapshots and an Enigma

Between 1462 and 1479, the inhabitants of villages in the deanery of
Wisbech (Isle of Ely) made their presentments to the bishop's consistory
court, responding to official requests for information on local misdemean-
ours of a moral or religious nature. This was a routine procedure, and the
evidence is unusual only in that it has survived. Detailed records of
ecclesiastical visitations in the fifteenth century are rarely found. The
evidence is extremely valuable, and enables us to form an impression of
the state of religious affairs at the parish level, from the viewpoint of the
parishioners themselves (or at least of their chosen representatives, the
churchwardens).[1]

Several locals were accused of sexually improper behaviour. A Whit-
tlesey man, for example, had been consorting with somebody else's wife 'at
unusual times'. Others had breached the peace within their communities,
and were labelled 'common quarrellers'. In a number of places, there was
concern over the state of the church, its surroundings and contents. In
Elm, the walls enclosing the vicarage were broken, 'so that swine can enter
the churchyard at will'. The vicar there was also reported for keeping back
from the church 'one lavatorium [a washing vessel] of pewter'. At Wis-
bech, the vicar and rector had failed in their responsibility for maintaining
the chancel, where the windows were not glazed and some of the church
ornaments were damaged. The vicar had also failed to find sufficient
surplices for the proper conduct of church services. In Parson Drove,
some local servants were accused of breaking 'Maynard Cross', one of
the parish's religious landmarks. In Newton, two men had refused to

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provide a 'lamp' (candle) to burn in front of the church's crucifix, 'as they ought to do'.

The behaviour of certain individuals during service time had also raised a few eyebrows. One servant from Whittlesey 'plays and disturbs Divine Service in the church on Sundays and festivals'. But at least he had turned up, which was more than could be said for the Whittlesey men who had herded cattle, ground malt and sold meat when they should have been in church. The economic motive was presumably strong in such cases, and probably in those of the parishioners who had detained portions of their 'Easter offering' to the church. Similarly, Robert Ward of Newton was refusing to pay the forty shillings he owed to the guild of St Katherine. Only one offence sounds more like that of a principled religious objector: Bartholomew Edmund of Leverington 'refuses to take off his hat in the church there at the time of the elevation of the Host'.

Several of the local clergy were considered negligent in their conduct of services. The churchwardens from Elm reported that 'They have not a priest to administer the Sacrament', and that their vicar had not been resident with them for years. In Whittlesey, one chaplain had defamed another by accusing him of failing to urge the observance of the fast on St Thomas's day. There were also signs that the lay officials of church and guild, responsible for maintaining religious order, were not always treated with the respect they deserved. The aldermen of one Wisbech guild, for example, informed the churchwardens that Thomas Joley had refused to obey them.

Nearly one and a half centuries later, in 1606–8, the same courts and procedures were still in place, and a new generation of fenlanders made their presentments in the deanery of Wisbech. In between, of course, the English Reformation had occurred (or begun) and the world had changed in numerous ways. There are also, however, solid signs of similarity. A second snapshot will permit comparisons to be drawn.[2]

Sex and morality were still important concerns, and generated an arguably more intense anxiety. In Elm, for example, Henry Townsend was living openly with someone else's wife, and John Watson 'useth lewde & filthie behaviour in shewinge his nakednes etc'. Isabella Webster, a little less luridly, was described as a 'common Rayler'. The churchyard in Elm was still causing concern, principally because Richard Roe had thrown his dead cattle into it, 'so that dogges carrye it into every Corner aboute the Church & the Sanctuarye is defiled with Carrion'. In Wisbech, the chancel was 'very much ruinated & so hath continued a longe tyme'. True enough. Clerical garments and ecclesiastical equipment could also still provoke

disquiet. Johan Houshold of Emneth was in trouble 'for sayinge publiquely at the Communion table before the cheife of the parishe that the olde surplisse was not better worth then to make a sheete or a smocke of'. The churchwardens of Elm found themselves accused of keeping the Prayer Book and communion chalice at home. Worse still, there was an ugly rumour that some had used the said chalice 'to quaffe in there jolytye'. The wardens utterly denied the second part of this charge. In Wisbech, it was reported that the parish's bible was 'not sufficient', lacking 'all the apostles'.

The behaviour of laypeople on the Sabbath was still not all it might have been. Edward Brigstock of Tydd St Giles was presented for 'unreverently...laughing and Groninge' during the sermon, with Edward Towe, 'a fiddler'. Others skipped church completely, preferring to 'water hempe', hunt ducks or play cards. There was no visible local precedent, however, for the frequent disputes over who sat where in church, nor for the presentments of numerous laypeople for neglecting to receive communion or attend Sunday services. More outrageously still, a Wisbech butcher 'encouraged & sett a dogge upon certaine that were goinge to the Church to heare divine service on the holly day'.

There were still those layfolk who refused to pay 'the money wch was layed for the repaire of the Church', and those whose objections look more conscientious. Early Jacobean Wisbech, for example, had a few individuals who were 'supposed [i.e. believed] to favor the error of the Brownists', and two who 'have separated themselves from our Congregacon' in favour of 'a reformed Churche in Amsterdam'. Other parishes reported the presence of small numbers of Catholic recusants.

Members of the clergy could still fail to match lay expectations. The vicar of Whittlesey was presented because he did not announce holy days and fasts, and the incumbent at Wisbech was said to be 'always absent from us'. In addition, he preached only once a year and 'alloweth us noe preachinge Minister'. Churchwardens, like their ministers, certainly came in for their share of criticism from local people. In Leverington, for example, John Bishop was presented for speaking against the wardens as they put up 'sentences of scripture to bewtifye the Church'. As we shall see, insulting the churchwardens was developing into something of an art form amongst an inventive minority of the English laity.

In the second of these snapshots, there are many signs of a religious environment that had undergone conspicuous change. The documentation is much richer, and it seems that local church government had become more thorough, sophisticated and intrusive in the intervening

decades. The hints of physical change are numerous too. In local churches, the 'lamps', crucifixes and images of saints had gone, replaced by scriptural sentences. The laity were now required to receive the communion regularly, and could expect a reprimand if they did not. The religious guilds had been dissolved long ago, and the number of priests and chaplains substantially reduced. The new 'ministers' were expected to preach regularly and with expertise, and to promote a religion centred on the vernacular Bible and Prayer Book. The reformed Church of England recognised many fewer days of feast and fast. Finally, the cases of dissent suggest a greater religious diversity amongst the laity by the early seventeenth century.

Yet there are also many signs of continuity. The impulses, attitudes and priorities of these fenlanders had certainly not been transformed beyond recognition. The citizens of Wisbech and surrounding parishes remained preoccupied with social morality, above all the preservation of peace amongst neighbours. They still paid great attention to the conservation and embellishment of their sacred surroundings, and to the promotion of suitably respectful behaviour when in and around the church. In both periods, they knew how the clergy should behave, both morally and liturgically, and they were not afraid to reprimand those who fell short of the required standards. Many feast days may have been abolished, but the remaining ones continued to punctuate the year and to hold significance. Laypeople worshipped in the same buildings as before, and operated through the same system of jurisdictions and institutions. From both sources, there is a strong sense that the laity were *involved* in the running of the church, even if a minority of them always fell foul of the majority. Some of these continuities may seem rather obvious, but they existed at quite a deep level and are important. As we shall see, the nature of the balance between change and continuity is fundamental to an understanding of the English Reformation.

So much for the snapshots. Now what of the enigma? His name was William Akers, and he too was a man of the Wisbech fens. Akers's story, which ends with his death in 1590, is bizarre, contradictory and confusing. It can serve as an early indication of the fascinating but frustrating interpretative problems with which religious historians of this period must wrestle.

We can get to know William Akers relatively well, for the simple reason that he was a man of unusual passion. Most of his contemporaries pursued their interests far more quietly. In 1581, the Ely Consistory Court was informed that, on Easter Sunday, Akers had spoken evil words of his

parson, saying 'that Mr Bowler did preache such a sermone ... as was not mete for a man to here, And sayd alsoe that if he preached soe in some place he woulde be pulled oute of the pulpit like a rascall'. Mr Bowler, it emerged from other presentments in the court book, was a minister of distinctly puritan leanings. Akers's Easter Day outburst was in fact the climax to a period of alleged disruptive behaviour, during which he had been rebuked by the sidesmen (churchwardens' assistants) for his 'stirringe' ways, and had responded by calling them 'more busye than wise'. He had refused to pay a fine for his offensive conduct. Akers's relationship with local officialdom did not improve in 1582, and he was accused of attempting to ring the church bells 'superstitiouslye', of insulting the churchwardens, and, just before Christmas, of being 'droncken in most beastely and fylthye manner to the ofence of manye people'. In addition, it was reported that he protected his adulterous daughter from authority, that he sowed strife amongst his neighbours, and that he slept in church during Mr Bowler's sermons and services, presumably exhausted from his other activities.

When William Akers came to make his will in 1590, however, he opened with an unexpected page of exceptionally pious pronouncements. Nearly all wills of the period began with some form of religious section, in which the testator committed his or her soul to God, but Akers's preamble was unquestionably out of the ordinary. He declared his belief in the Trinity, praised God in extravagant terms, asked the parson (the same Mr Bowler) to assist with the choice of a burial place inside the church, asserted that he belonged to 'the Elect', and spoke of his firm faith in Jesus Christ as his only saviour. He then prayed for forgiveness of his sins, and for the strength to persevere in faith and to avoid all worldly temptations. Only then did he proceed to bequeath his more tangible possessions, described as 'those blessynges wherewth God of his goodnes & mercye hath Inryched me'.[3]

So what sort of a man was this? Perhaps a consistently devoted, though imperfect, member of the Church of England, who objected to the puritanical liberties his minister took with the Prayer Book. Perhaps a thoroughly ungodly man who passed through a dramatic conversion to fervent Protestant piety in his last years, befriending his former enemies along the way. Perhaps even a closet Catholic (hence the 'superstitious' attachment to church bells) whose remarkable testamentary preamble was actually written on his behalf, but not in his words, by an evangelically Protestant neighbour. These are all possibilities that can also be applied to the population at large. Had the first decades of the Reformation pro-

duced a society dominated by puritans, or by 'Anglicans', or by 'church papists', or by irreligious drunkards? We will never know for certain, but it is hoped that this book will provide some guidance, and help to stimulate further discussion.

What is 'Popular Religion', and Does it Matter?

No designation is neutral, and both components of the term 'popular religion' cause problems. 'Popular' has a number of associations, ranging from the seemingly uncomplicated to the obviously controversial. It can be used to refer simply to that which was widespread, or generally liked. But more specifically, it means 'of the people', and thus implies the existence of a smaller elite group whose members did not belong to 'the people' and did not share their values. This in turn suggests the possibility of a social system based around relationships of domination and subordination, and therefore of a popular culture that was imposed on the people from above, rather than growing organically from their midst. 'Popular' can come to mean designed '*for* the people' but not necessarily '*of*' them. The term can therefore imply a two-tier, antagonistic culture, and it is by no means clear for early-modern historians that this is an assumption deserving to be written into the very terminology we use. There is also a danger of implying that 'the people' somehow spoke with one voice. This was certainly not the case, for the world cannot have looked precisely the same to men and women, to old and young, or to rural and urban dwellers.

'Religion' is no better, principally because it is difficult to decide which forms of belief or practice merit inclusion and which do not. In late twentieth-century society, most people understand religion to apply to organised church worship; but what of astrology, fortune-telling, and firmly held beliefs about the dangers of walking under ladders? These all deal with supernatural forces, and with attempts to understand, serve or utilise them. Dictionary definitions of religion as 'the belief in a superhuman controlling power' cannot legitimately be applied in a way that includes God but excludes the black cat. The most famous modern book about early-modern popular beliefs in England made the distinction in its title between 'religion' and 'magic'. One group of commentators subsequently complained that the author, Keith Thomas, had failed to comprehend the power of organised Christian religion, by treating it as

comparable to practices such as palmistry; another group, more anthro-
pological in its instincts, turned this on its head and criticised him for
underestimating the coherence and force of the supposedly 'magical'
beliefs, which had been excluded, without justification, from the 'religion'
category. The issue is still not settled.

Despite these difficulties, it seems that historians will continue to find
themselves stuck with the term 'popular religion'. For those of us inter-
ested in the ways in which the early-modern majority gave meaning to, or
found meaning in, their lives, there seems to be nothing more suitable.
Eamon Duffy has recently proposed 'traditional religion' as an alternative,
but the term has distinct limitations.[4] It helps us towards a richer
understanding of the last decades of majority Catholicism in the
fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but it is much less useful in enabling
us to understand the development of majority Protestantism in the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'Traditional religion' was a major
component of 'popular religion' in this period, but the two terms are
hardly synonymous. For the religion of the English people to have de-
veloped in this period as it did, there must have been a narrow but
powerful current of non-traditional piety flowing through the system.
Duffy's term excludes this current, and so offers only a partial explanation
of a complex process.

The term 'popular religion' is therefore used in this study not with any
great sense of enthusiasm, but for want of something more satisfactory.
The emphasis is primarily upon the people beneath the level of the gentry,
though I certainly do not wish to imply that 'elite' religion was fundament-
ally different. My focus will be upon the majority of England's inhabitants,
with the result that martyrs, 'puritans' and spiritual misfits may not enjoy
quite the level of attention to which they have become accustomed.
'Popular religion' will be taken to refer to all the varied beliefs
and practices that brought the early-modern majority into contact with
the divine or supernatural. As will become obvious, it is my opinion
that Christianity and the church dominated this interface from the view-
point of all but a minority of contemporaries. It seems clear, nevertheless,
that many other strands of belief and practice were also woven into
the cloth of popular religion. Using this cloth in a myriad of patterns,
ordinary people fashioned for themselves spiritual coats which they hoped
would keep them warm in the winter, cool in the summer, and happy in
the end.

Another question relates to the importance of all this. Why should we
bother studying a mass of long-dead people whose views, according to

many commentators, counted for little even in their own day? One contemporary writer, admittedly with tongue in cheek, acknowledged that the 'plaine countrie fellow' was not without religion, but portrayed it as 'a part of his coppy-hold which he takes of his land-lord'. The historian A. L. Rowse, with his tongue more conventionally placed, betrayed similar prejudices when he spoke of the 'stupid and backward-looking peasantry' in sixteenth-century Cornwall.[5] What, then, is the point of studying such people? Three justifications come to mind. In the first place, the careful work of social historians is a mark of respect for all the nearly blank faces of the past, the people whose portraits were never painted, and who spoke to posterity only in disjointed snatches recorded here and there. We should study them because they deserve to be studied. Secondly, we study them because, contrary to the opinions reported above, the ordinary people of the early-modern period *did* matter at the time, even if their 'betters' were not in the habit of admitting it. The argument that all meaningful power lay in the hands of the gentry and aristocracy, so that 'the people' simply followed their landlords, is no longer sustainable. Early-modern systems of government also depended on the opinions of more humble local office-holders (churchwardens and the like), and those opinions were shaped from below as much as from above. Many of the seemingly most autocratic royal dictats can only be understood in their admittedly indirect relation to a much deeper social context, one that conditioned governmental possibilities and therefore motives. The 'little people' could and did exert an influence, though it was of course disproportionate to their numbers. To a surprising extent, they governed themselves, ran their own affairs, and their responses to official orders could be highly selective. Early-modern government was a matter not just of dictation and obedience, but of negotiation and settlement. Of course the dice were loaded, but the game was still worth playing.

Finally, historians study the ordinary people of the past for the simple reason that their world is intrinsically fascinating. To some, this may not justify, but it certainly explains. Colourful fragments of a lost world lie scattered around us like the pieces of a vast jigsaw, and the task of reconstruction can obsess (and madden) a mind, just like any puzzle. It is a strange and compelling thing to make partial contact with some of the 'lost people of Europe', people like the mercurial William Akers. In a real sense, they were our ancestors, and the seeds of us were in them.

How Can We Study Popular Religion?

If we are seeking to reconstruct the religion of the majority, and if the majority rarely went 'on the record', then what hope is there of success? It is no easy matter to 'get *within* poor persons', as one seventeenth-century clergyman remarked with frustration.[6] Historians have often dodged the problem by concentrating on those forms of popular religion that were more exotic, enthusiastic, or extreme, and therefore more visible, than the norm. Alternatively, they have felt defeated by the problem, commenting pessimistically that 'Orthodoxy, like happiness, has no history.'[7] Our quarry is certainly elusive, allowing us only fleeting glimpses and never pausing long enough for us to take aim (with camera, not gun), but the religion of the majority is slowly becoming more comprehensible as our equipment and our fieldcraft improve. It is likely that popular religion conceived as the faith of the many will, in the next decade, come to provide a much-needed balance to popular religion conceived as the faith of the unusually committed on all sides.

Patterns of religious belief and practice in sixteenth-century England can be examined through a wide variety of primary sources. Amongst the most commonly consulted are wills, in which testators left their souls to God using a variety of pious expressions, and in which they often made more tangible bequests to the church or to charitable causes. Church court records, such as those mentioned at the opening of this chapter, are another favoured source. They provide detailed information on the religious climate in the localities, and on the parochial response to orders from above. Frequently, the presentments were framed in response to 'visitation articles', another useful source, which consisted of detailed questions from the bishop concerning the state of spiritual affairs in the parishes. The records of other courts, and of central government itself, can also be mined for evidence concerning official dealings with groups of miscreants (rebels, heretics and the like), whose motives were often wholly or partly religious.

More mundane but no less valuable are the records kept by the lay officers of individual parishes, most notably the 'churchwardens' accounts', which offer extensive information on the management of church funds from year to year. On occasion, the wardens also made notes relating to the allocation of church seating and the names of those receiving the communion on given dates. Literary sources can also be taken in for questioning. These range from the cheaper forms of print, especially ballads and chapbooks, through the various forms of clerical

literature (for example, catechisms and manuals of piety), to mammoth works of religious propaganda such as John Foxe's famous *Book of Martyrs*. All of these reflect directly or indirectly upon the religiosity of the English majority. Finally, historians are making increasing use of the buildings, monuments and windows that survive from the sixteenth century. In general, the paper sources become more plentiful as the period goes on, while the stone and glass sources move in the opposite direction.

It is certainly true that none of these sources affords us a clear view of our quarry. Standing alongside the ailing testator, for example, there was often a clergyman or professional scribe. We can rarely be sure that the recorded spiritual bequests were truly the considered and voluntary acts of the individual in whose name the document was written. Churchwardens' accounts *are* extremely valuable, but their survival is patchy and we can usually only speculate about the motives behind the figures. When the government of Edward VI ordered parishes to make a series of distinctively Protestant purchases for the church, did the often sluggish local response reflect a rejection of the new doctrines, or a shortage of money, or a pragmatic inkling that the sick, Protestant boy-king would soon be succeeded by a Catholic?

The importance of cheap print as a source cannot be denied, but any investigation is dogged by uncertainties over the size and social composition of the consuming public. How 'popular' was 'popular literature'? Clerical publications and visitation articles are similarly problematic, because they often tell us much more about the standards and objectives of the authors than about the state of religion in society as a whole. And the assorted court records, though amongst the most colourful sources we have, are inevitably biased towards evidence of conflict. They may therefore give a misleading impression of polarity, dispute and excited engagement. There is a risk that historians may end up presenting a sort of 'Match of the Day' Reformation, packed with goals and sendings-off but without the unexceptional interplay of a full, live game.

Scholars in gloomy mood can, therefore, dig themselves into a deep, dark hole from which there seems to be no prospect of escape. It would, however, be a serious mistake for them to abandon all hope. It will have been noticed that the sources, when viewed in their full range, are rich and varied. If approached in an appropriate spirit of critical optimism, they can tell us a great deal. At the bottom of our hole, there are enough bits and pieces for the construction of a makeshift but serviceable ladder.

We must also be aware, in seeking a suitable spirit of enquiry, that our own perspective on the past embodies distortions of its own. As we

examine the evidence of sixteenth-century popular religion, several poss-
ibilities need to be borne in mind. In the first place, four centuries of
religious history have driven into us the importance of a fierce and
fundamental divide between Protestantism and Catholicism. This divide
is given physical expression in the streets of modern Belfast, even if English
cities have found other issues over which to risk rupture. The Reformation
chasm yawns large in our minds as we look back, and it is therefore wise to
remember that, in the parishes of mid-sixteenth-century England, it was
something new and peculiar, a distinction that had to be learned rather
than simply inherited. That it often was successfully learned is implied by
numerous examples, such as that of the Protestant Kentishman who, in
the 1570s, said 'if I knew him that would go to mass I would thrust my
dagger in him'. Earlier, in 1536, a Protestant had been shot dead, Belfast-
style, as he went about his business in Cheapside.[8] Some people learned
quickly, but we should not assume that violent polarities over religion
developed instantaneously in the minds and communities of the majority.

Secondly, modern culture places a high emphasis on the acquisition of
knowledge, and upon the development of clear, personal beliefs that can
be held in one's mind and articulated to order. Once again, it may be a
mistake to transport this emphasis back into the sixteenth century, where it
often seems that ordinary people were not at all obsessed with intellectual
knowledge and verbal articulation. As John Craig and Mark Byford
have both argued, historians must be ready to seek meaning in the
seemingly 'inarticulate' actions of contemporary parishioners as they
attended services or contributed to the upkeep of their churches. Religion
for them was not principally about careful, intellectual attention to ques-
tions of belief.[9]

Similarly, we seem to set considerable store by intellectual consistency.
'Internal contradiction' is the un-doing of many an undergraduate essay,
and we expect one another to develop a systematic and rational line of
argument on all matters of interest. Sixteenth-century people, in contrast,
often seem to have been adept at living with contradictions. This does not
appear to have been an 'either/or' society, though attempts were under
way to turn it into one. As we shall see, people were able to hold onto
aspects of Catholic belief and practice, while simultaneously learning to
think of themselves as Protestants; they could hate the idea of heresy, yet
treat the local heretics with a measure of sympathy and respect; and
radical dissenters could reject the validity of the established church's
services, yet serve the established church well throughout their lives. It
does not appear that consistency was all.

Finally, we live in a highly literate and highly electronic age. We are bombarded from all sides with visual information, and it is arguable that our imaginative capacities have been undermined as a result. Most of the time, we *receive* images rather than fashioning them in our own minds. Sixteenth-century imaginations must have been more active and more extensively used, and this is something we would do well to remember as we contemplate the impact of a religion of words, Protestantism, on a religion of pictures and rituals, Catholicism. Historians should not be too ready to accept the argument, frequently proposed, that when Protestants removed paintings from the church walls, they rendered official religion inaccessible to the majority. Would they have been so stupid? Perhaps ordinary people responded instinctively to the spoken words of their ministers by making pictures in their heads. Even we, culturally impoverished citizens of the late twentieth century, do not need television screens to form pictures from some of the verbal descriptions provided by early reformers. In the 1530s, for example, one author invited his audience to imagine Jesus Christ, so severely beaten that, from 'the sole of his foote: to the hiest part of his hed was not one place but the skinge and the flesshe was broken, rent and bloody for our sakes'.[10]

Historiographical Outlines (and Battle-Lines)

The varied source material, and the still-controversial atmosphere surrounding the issues at stake, help to explain why historians have proposed very different interpretations of the nature and development of popular religion during the sixteenth century. Inevitably, the concept of the 'Reformation' dominates the debate, as historians ask themselves whether it was an event or a process, whether it was welcomed or resisted, whether the initiative behind it lay with the populace or with their leading governors, and whether it deserves a capital or a lower-case 'r'. Historians are the captives of their sources, and the *r*eformation as it emerges from, say, wills may be very different in tone and texture from the more confrontational *R*eformation found, for example, in many literary sources. Similarly, sixteenth-century religion will naturally not look the same to historians of Protestant, Catholic or agnostic convictions. This is not to say that historians are incapable of rising above their preconceptions to some extent, but that they cannot do so completely (and some hardly seem to try).

Secondary material currently in print covers a vast range, and 'Reformation studies' have emerged in recent years as something of an academic industry. Approaches vary considerably, from Robert Whiting's intensive study of a single region during a fifty-year period, to Keith Thomas's grandly conceived survey of shifts in English popular religion over two centuries and more.[11] Different scholars concentrate on different aspects of the field, devoting their attention variously to changes in popular theology, patterns of church attendance, the activities of radical minorities, relations between laypeople and the clergy, and so forth. Underlying this rich variety, it may be useful to identify two distinct but powerful poles of perception which, while not achieving widespread acceptance, do clearly exert a forceful pull on the field as a whole. The majority of historians would resist total identification with either extreme, but would tend nevertheless to lean a little in their analysis towards one or the other. As Margaret Aston has suggested, 'Perhaps it is impossible to study the Reformation for long without becoming aligned – if one does not start off by being so.'[12]

It will come as no surprise that there is a distinctly sectarian element to our principal polarity, though it certainly is not possible to draw up the historiographical battle-lines on the basis of religious identity alone. At one pole stands A. G. Dickens, who has always portrayed the Reformation as basically a good thing. The majority may not actively have sought to take their part in the religious stirrings initiated in Germany by Martin Luther, but significant numbers of ordinary people are considered by Dickens to have seen the new light at an early date. They therefore assisted the reformist clergy and their powerful lay champions in the task of leading England bravely away from the clutter and confusion of the old religion, and into a religious world more spartan but more satisfying (and much better for you). For Dickens, the Reformation had purpose, direction, and also a certain inevitability. By the end of Edward VI's reign in 1553, the Protestant clock could not be turned back, and the reformers were 'an ever growing minority'. It is notable that Dickens does not say that the majority were convinced Protestants by this date, rather that convinced Protestants were advantageously placed (Mary's reign excepted) both geographically and politically. The English majority, in Dickens' estimation, were still conservative and unenthusiastic about reform in 1553, a date marked by the death of the nation's most Protestant sixteenth-century monarch.[13]

Professor Dickens's work has been justly celebrated, though its definitively Protestant assumptions now jar somewhat (definitively Catholic assumptions are more in vogue). At one point, he praises Elizabethan

puritanism for having 'taught men to see Christ through the eyes of St. Paul instead of through a cloud of minor saints, gilded legends and plain myths'.[14] This is hardly a balanced assessment, though we can at least commend the author for not seeking to conceal his bias. Dickens's choice of metaphor is also revealing. We are told, for example, that under Mary 'the forest of Protestantism was spreading relentlessly across the landscape of the nation'.[15] The expansion of a forest is, of course, a natural process, and nowadays seen as a healthy one too. This is the metaphor of a historian who views the religious history of the sixteenth century as primarily about 'the rise of Protestantism', rather than about developing a rounded understanding of the process of change, with all its contrary tides and cross-currents. Other historians, as we shall see, would turn the metaphor around, portraying the Protestant Reformation as a terrible act of *de*forestation.

    For the sake of symmetry, it would be pleasing to place Eamon Duffy at the other pole, for his committed Catholicism arms him with assumptions equal and opposite to those of Professor Dickens. Unfortunately, Dr Duffy's positive view of Protestant endeavour after *c.*1570 disqualifies him from consideration. Christopher Haigh is the next obvious candidate. Regrettably, however, he is not a Catholic, though his work has earned him a place in Catholic hearts comparable to that of Jack Charlton on many an Irish mantelpiece.[16] This leaves J. J. Scarisbrick, who meets both the required criteria. His most relevant work bears a title similar to that chosen by Dickens, but beyond this the two authors recognise little of themselves in the other. Where Dickens saw his subject as the spread of Protestantism, Scarisbrick announced in his preface that he was leaving this (seemingly relevant) subject out of the account. This alerts us to the fact that the acute differences between historians often relate to questions of emphasis. There is a reluctance, at both poles, to tell the whole story.

    Scarisbrick's Reformation was regrettable, undesirable and undesired. People, he argues, were thoroughly content with the ministrations of the traditional church, despite its imperfections, and there was no groundswell of opinion making fundamental change ever more likely. The Reformation was an act of state, and almost nothing more. Far from bringing the laity to the fore in religious affairs, it radically curtailed their opportunities for involvement, creating a church in which parishioners sat statically in their pews while remote and all-powerful clergy harangued them. The progress of Protestantism, not surprisingly, was slow and uncertain. Scarisbrick's preconceptions, like those of Dickens, arouse suspicion. We are invited to consider, for example, 'a random sample' of late-medieval wills, which are

employed to make the point that people bequeathed large sums to a
universally beloved church. Yet it is obvious to those with knowledge of
the sources that this is not pot-luck at all (unless the pot is a jackpot), but a
mouth-watering selection of the choicest morsels.[17]

Christopher Haigh adds further force to this portrayal, presenting us
with not one but a set of Reformations, amounting in sum to a process
that had no coherence or sense of direction. In his words, 'England had
blundering Reformations, which most did not understand, which few
wanted, and which no one knew had come to stay.' Throughout the
mid-century, ordinary people despised the numerically insignificant Prot-
estants living amongst them, and readily turned them over to the author-
ities for examination and, if necessary, burning. High political
circumstances meant that Protestantism emerged from the tussle as the
official, though insecure, religion of the nation, but the majority sought
and found ways in which to treat the new communion service as if it were
the old Mass. The whole sorry process produced a majority of 'parish
Anglicans', but pitifully few believing Protestants. In Haigh's view, Protest-
antism (for which we can often read 'puritanism') had very little appeal for
the majority, and Protestants were always isolated and unpopular figures
within their localities. Once again, the author's use of evidence suggests
the influence of unspoken bias. For the late-medieval church, a rate of ten
tithe disputes per year in the Norwich diocese is dismissed as insignificant,
certainly not an indication that the laity resented the church; but in
Elizabethan Essex, religious disputes in twelve parishes during an entire
decade are presented as evidence that Protestant ministers were deeply
unpopular. Late-medieval conformity demonstrates commitment to the
church; Elizabethan conformity reveals mere obedience. Historians work-
ing at our second pole certainly present us with a different Reformation,
but it is not necessarily a more persuasive one.[18]

Most historians inhabit the more temperate zone between these two
poles, but all are constantly aware that the bold utterances of scholars like
Dickens and Scarisbrick serve to define their field of study. Some histor-
ians, like Eamon Duffy, can be said to draw on elements from both ends of
the spectrum. He is most noted for his belief that Protestantism was
fundamentally unwelcome, destructive, and disastrous in its first decades.
The Protestant martyrs of Mary's reign, towering heroes in Dickens's
account, are dealt with in a couple of paragraphs, and Duffy almost writes
Protestantism out of the picture by subtitling his work 'Traditional reli-
gion'. Pre-Reformation Lollardy is similarly dismissed, despite the fact that
there was clearly a Lollard 'tradition' too, even if it involved only a small

minority. Yet Duffy also holds that, once the memories of a wonderful past had faded, Protestant educators *did* have what it took to make real progress at the grassroots level. The perspective of Margaret Spufford on post-Reformation faith is in many ways similar.[19]

Further variations on the two main themes are numerous. Robert Whiting's study of the Reformation in the west country gathers a wealth of vivid material and argues that, while a rich traditional religion crumbled readily under official pressure, people in general failed to take the new doctrines to their hearts. The solid obedience of the English people lies at the centre of his account, and he, like Scarisbrick, views the impact of Protestant reform as essentially negative. Mid-sixteenth-century people moved from religious enthusiasm into 'conformism, passivity, or even indifference'. Susan Brigden has written a superb narrative of the Reformation in London, recreating for us the many complex twists and turns along the way, and demonstrating the involvement of many of the capital's laity in the process of forging their own religious destinies. The attention granted to the committedly Protestant minority is more reminiscent of Dickens than of Scarisbrick, though Brigden avoids his extravagances of interpretation. Patrick Collinson's immensely subtle and influential work defies all attempts at crass classification. His lifelong interest in the Elizabethan puritans clearly says something about his sense of what was and is important, and we can occasionally hear him gently rebuking scholars of Haigh's 'catastrophist school' for their failure to appreciate that sixteenth-century Protestantism had its popular element and was not necessarily an unmitigated disaster in the parishes. Nevertheless, Collinson recognises that the English majority did not want the Reformation, and absorbed it only slowly.[20]

These are some of the most famous names within the field, though it would of course be possible to mention others. At present, it is also possible to detect the emergence of a new and disparate group of historians who are approaching the old questions in new ways, or asking slightly different questions. Current work on late-medieval piety is soundly dominated by the Duffy line of interpretation, but work on Elizabethan and Jacobean religion has recently been moving in new and interesting directions. A fundamental, underlying question concerns compliance: why did English people, happy with the old church, generally shuffle obediently towards allegiance to the new church? It seems unlikely that work written at either of the historiographical poles will ever provide satisfactory answers (and the answers will inevitably be multiple) to this question. We are therefore fortunate that, every year, less militant scholarship is adding bright new pieces to the puzzle.

Tessa Watt, for example, has contributed a thorough and fascinating account of cheap religious print between 1550 and 1640, and has opened up the possibility of religious change as a gradual, flexible, negotiated process. Work by Jeremy Boulton and Nicholas Alldridge has demonstrated the administrative ability of the post-Reformation church to incorporate its local members, and to provide for their needs and expectations. Martin Ingram's work on church courts has, amongst many other things, revealed the sober and sensible tactics adopted by these institutions in working towards a gradual transformation of English religious norms. Articles by John Craig and Eric Carlson have carried us towards a more sophisticated understanding of the important role of parochial church officers, selected from amongst the laity. The work of Judith Maltby is improving our awareness of the attitudes, often highly committed, of unexceptional parishioners towards the established church in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Mark Byford places a similar emphasis, encouraging us to consider the power of continuities, and to avoid treating Protestantism and popular culture as necessarily opposed. These contributions will help us with the crucial problem of understanding how, why, and when the majority of people came to define themselves as Protestant.[21]

And on the other side of the religious divide, Alexandra Walsham's research on 'church papists', those Catholics who periodically attended services of the post-Reformation church, has greatly enhanced our knowledge of a vital category of English believers. They too can provide invaluable clues concerning the compliance conundrum. Finally, the work of Ian Green on catechisms and religious education more widely will add immeasurably to our appreciation of the ways in which the vast majority of people encountered the Protestant Reformation.[22] It seems likely that an older emphasis upon the activities of the most evangelical of educators will be found wanting. This book is indebted to all of the scholars mentioned in the paragraphs above, and to many others besides.

The Narrative Outline

It is not the purpose of this study to provide a detailed chronicle of religious developments in the period. A swift and necessarily superficial overview may, however, be of value to those who are relatively new to the subject. The hundred-year period under view can be divided up in a