



The English Reformation After Revisionism

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Recent Trends in the Study of Christianity in Sixteenth-Century Europe

by DIARMAID MACCULLOCH, MARY LAVEN,
AND EAMON DUFFY

1. INTRODUCTION

by CRAIG HARLINE

When the Executive Board of The Renaissance Society of America asked me to organize the Trends panel for the Society's 2005 conference, they also suggested that its theme should be religion. To keep this theme as broad and flexible as possible, I blandly titled the panel "Christianity in Sixteenth-Century Europe," but I knew that there would have to be some further reducing and categorizing in order to facilitate the division of labor among the speakers — and this alone would provoke debate. For although trends in the writing of religious history, or any other sort of history, might obviously be approached chronologically, geographically, conceptually, or still otherwise, everyone has his or her favorites. In true academic fashion I could not settle on simply one approach, but complicated things by choosing a confessional arrangement tempered by chronological and geographical considerations: in other words, I envisioned three papers on the subthemes of Continental Protestantism, Continental Catholicism, and England — the last because of the location of the 2005 conference at the University of Cambridge, and the assumption that it might be worthwhile to devote some special attention to our hosts.

The three distinguished panelists who agreed to address these topics were gracious and willing, never more so than when politely voicing objections to my arrangement. But I had expected nothing less, since their liveliness and independence of mind were precisely why I had asked them to participate in the first place. Mary Laven kindly insisted that her paper was to be on Counter-Reformation Catholicism and that my neutral label was simply too flabby — and, yes, she knew quite well what she was doing in using that term. Diarmaid MacCulloch respectfully noted that it was rather artificial to separate English from Continental Protestantism (and that Continental was the wrong word anyway) — in other words, maybe we didn't really need a separate paper on England! How was I to break this news to the third panelist, Eamon Duffy, who had already prepared his paper on that very subject? In fact, Eamon never did present his paper, but not because it was unwelcome on the panel, nor even because of such

tiresome questions from me as to whether he would require any audiovisual equipment. Rather, at the last minute he was called away to Rome on even more pressing business, as one of the BBC's correspondents for the funeral of Pope John Paul II. He did agree to submit his paper here for publication, however, along with the other two, and readers may judge for themselves how well it fits — very nicely, in my opinion, but that may merely be the organizer's ego responding to Diarmaid's perfectly legitimate observation.

In any case, I thought the papers important and helpful enough in addressing recent historiographical trends that they ought to be published as a group, in slightly revised form, for the benefit of an even wider audience than the sizeable crowd that heard them (okay, two of them). Hence, all three are offered together here.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

2. PROTESTANTISM IN MAINLAND EUROPE: NEW DIRECTIONS

by DIARMAID MACCULLOCH

Most stimulating — for this Anglophone historian, at least — has been the reintegration of religious history into mainstream social and political history generally, and also the heightened sense of an international movement embracing an entire continent and beyond. We no longer make artificial distinctions between the Reformations of the Atlantic Isles and those on the mainland; we can see more clearly what is local and what is part of an international phenomenon; and we can also appreciate the artificiality of considering Protestantism in isolation from reform movements in both the Pre-Reformation Western Church and Post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism. I commend the advantages of emancipating religious history from specific religious commitment. I also discuss the effect of the breaking down of barriers to travel and research in the wake of the 1989–90 revolutions in the recovery of our sense of the importance of Reformations in Eastern Europe, and also highlight our realization that a heritage of Southern European dissent shaped the heterodoxy that dissolved Reformation certainties.

There are some obvious things which one could say about new directions in studying European Protestantism. It has been stimulating and exciting to see religious history and the history of doctrine being taken seriously outside seminaries and theological faculties and being reintegrated into mainstream social and political history. Equally, there is the continuing progress towards fulfillment of Lord Acton's dream of the opening of

all archives, admittedly on a considerably longer timespan than, in his Victorian optimism, he expected.¹ Some of the great publishing projects of recent years have opened up resources, even on familiar figures, to a wide audience: one thinks of the publication of the French sermons of Calvin, astonishingly neglected in previous years, or of the steady accumulation of volumes from the Geneva consistory. Equally, there are such projects as the majestically-proceeding editions of the published and manuscript works and correspondence of Heinrich Bullinger and Martin Bucer. However, I can almost take these as givens of our profession. I would prefer to steer you to the exact title of my contribution.

When the organizers extended me the honor of inviting me to join this panel, I was asked to talk not on Protestantism in mainland Europe, but on “Continental Protestantism”: the change of title was a piece of detailed cussedness of my own. I do consider the change to have been worth making. There is a peculiar Anglocentricity about the label *Continental Protestantism*, which implies that the islands comprising England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales are not part of a “Continent,” while other islands, such as Iceland, Corsica, or Malta, no doubt are. There is an element of imperial nostalgia in this usage, which seems very odd in the twenty-first century. To a British historian born at the beginning of the 1950s, the word *Continent* has a rather comforting reminiscence of childhood: it conjures up black-and-white films, sensible clothes, and reassuringly stout luggage piled on the railway platform at London’s Victoria Station, waiting for the Continental train to Dover. Moreover, to talk of “the Continent” is a reflection of specifically English preoccupations rather than more general British anxieties: it is reflected in contemporary politics, for instance, in the extraordinary suspicion of the European Union expressed so frequently in crude terms in the English popular press. The Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh do not suffer from this particular prejudice, though they have plenty of alternative prejudices of their own.

More surprising is the way in which American historiography of the Reformation has apparently retained this English usage for *the Continent*, which makes little sense in a nation which is part of an entirely different continent. I make no apologies for my pedantry: the usage has made for bad Reformation history. Treatment of “the Continental Reformation” has generally been paired, not least in university history syllabi, with accounts of an “English Reformation.” Classic Anglican historians in the wake of the Oxford Movement, mostly High Church in outlook, loved to minimize the

¹Stern, 247–48 (Lord Acton’s letter to the contributors to the *Cambridge Modern History*).

Church of England's connections with events elsewhere in the European Reformation, in order to minimize the Church of England's connections with the Reformation, full stop. The thought behind this was not original to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: it was pioneered in the Tudor age by English Roman Catholic polemicists — particularly Robert Persons (1546–1610) and Nicholas Sander (ca. 1530–81) — when they applied labels such as *Zwinglian* or *Calvinist* to the Protestant Church in the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I: the implication was that, unlike Catholicism, Protestantism was a nasty foreign import corrupting the religion of good English people. Remarkably, this Roman Catholic strategy was then borrowed at the end of the sixteenth century by those members of the Church of England who pioneered a ceremonialist and sacramentalist theology within the bounds of this Reformed Church.²

The phrase *the Continent* was therefore an extremely useful rhetorical device for Anglicanism. It also had the incidental effect of marginalizing any other Reformations that might happen to have shared the Atlantic Isles with the Reformation of England: English historians could thus treat the Scottish Reformation rather patronizingly as an interesting piece of local history, of concern only to the Scots — a myopia which has begun to be remedied in recent years, for instance in Leigh Schmidt's brilliant demonstration of the role of Scottish Protestant Eucharistic practice in the origins of American Protestant revivalism.³ Probably one of the reasons why it was comforting to the English to do this was because the Scottish Reformation was quite unashamedly linked to Reformations elsewhere.

What has therefore been most stimulating for this Anglophone historian has been a heightened sense in recent scholarship of an international movement of Reformation embracing an entire continent and beyond. I speak as a convert in this, converted by my own biographical project on Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556). When writing the book I did have a number of lucky new archival finds, but more interesting was the way in which the whole body of material on Cranmer began pulling me towards a picture which I had not found in the existing biographies. The evidence had been there, but it had not been treated with the perspective which I found being thrust upon me, a perspective still taking shape as I brought my text to a close. In the past Cranmer had usually been treated as an English churchman with a few foreign friends. The Cranmer I met

²MacCulloch, 1999, 170–73. For Thomas Cartwright's similar comments on the "papist" origins of the name *Puritan* "very unbrotherly confirmed" by anti-Puritan or conformist Protestants in the Church of England, see Ayre, 1:172.

³Schmidt, 21–26.

emerged as a major player in a Europe-wide revolution, with a cosmopolitan outlook admittedly exceptional among his English contemporaries.⁴

The Reformation that Cranmer helped to create was part of a larger event, and its nearest relative was the Strassburg of Martin Bucer (1491–1551). Cranmer had no affection for many things which give Anglicanism its particular character today. It was no Anglican who corresponded with Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560), John Calvin (1509–64), and Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75), who knew at first hand Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), Bernardino Ochino (1487–1564), and Jan Łaski (1499–1560). Cranmer pulled a marginal Reformation in an offshore island into the center of what was happening on the mainland. And the descriptive label *Anglican* can hardly be used with any plausibility in an English context before Charles II's Restoration in 1660.

If such distancing from traditional historiography can be done on the man who was at the heart of the English Reformation, it might well be true of other parts of the Reformation as well. Was Lutheranism Lutheran? When it crystallized in the Formula of Concord, it owed as much to the independent mind of Philipp Melanchthon as it did to the varied and not always compatible inspirations of Luther. Thanks principally to Melanchthon's careful exposition, it rejected the logic of predestinarianism implied in Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, while on the other hand it rejected Melanchthon's revisionist thoughts on the nature of Eucharistic presence. There can be little doubt that these contrasting stances were shaped because, in each case, they represented the opposite of the mainstream consensus in Reformed Protestantism.

One might by contrast point to a recent variety of Lutheran revisionism which is internal to the tradition, embodied in the work of Tuomo Mannermaa and the so-called "Finnish School." This centers on the assertion that much later interpretation of Luther has mistakenly concentrated on his assertion that justified humanity experiences an imputation of Christ's alien righteousness as its means of salvation.⁵ Rather, the Finnish School asserts, a form of *theosis* (divinization) characterizes the heart of Luther's message. The language is deliberately borrowed from the Greek Orthodox tradition, and thus it reveals the intention and context of this theological enterprise: it is an attempt, worthy in itself, for Lutherans to

⁴MacCulloch, 1996.

⁵For an introduction, see Braaten and Jenson. *Ibid.*, 1–41 (the first two essays by Tuomo Mannermaa and the response by Robert W. Jenson), reveals both the ecumenical dimension of the School and what the uncharitable might regard as wish-fulfilment on the subject of Luther's theology.

find common ground with Orthodoxy, an attempt launched amid the East-West détente of the 1970s, but taking greater impetus in a post-1989 world where such dialogue has become much more urgent for churches around the Baltic.

The Finnish School has made little impact on Anglophone historians and literature scholars, although it has aroused some interest among theologians. That is in part because most of the important literature has remained in Finnish or in German. But it is arguable in any case that its interpretation should not be given much place in new accounts of the Reformation, because it is based on theological, rather than historical, concerns. Historically speaking, it is based on a false premise: just because Luther can be found to make statements about humanity's relationship with Christ that sound like Orthodox formulations of the concept of *theosis*, it does not follow that these have any relationship to an Orthodox theology of *theosis* in a theologian who showed a marked lack of interest in the Christian world beyond the familiar Latin West. It might be pointed out that Andreas Osiander (1496/8–1552), the Lutheran theologian who might be seen as coming closest to the notion of *theosis*, found himself an outcast in most Lutheran circles, and had to travel from Nuremberg to far-off Königsberg for proposing a doctrine of imparted, rather than imputed, righteousness.⁶

Reformed Protestantism, too, should hearken to a proper revisionist historiography. I have argued that *Anglicanism* is a word best jettisoned by historians; *Calvinism* ought to go the same way. Philip Benedict's recent superb survey volume on the Reformed Protestant world is a closely argued statement of that case, marred only by a decision perhaps forced on him by his publishers to subtitle his book *A Social History of Calvinism*.⁷ The message of Benedict's work is that Calvin was only one among a set of theologians and church leaders, the earliest and most important figures of whom represent a roll-call of Cranmer's mainland European Reformer friends already cited: Bullinger, Bucer, Martyr, and Łaski. Zürich has never made the mistake of confusing the Reformed tradition with Calvinism, but Zürich lost the discreet struggle with Geneva for European preeminence as early as 1568, when the struggle over church polity crystallized in the Erastian dispute in Heidelberg. Because of this classic moment, it has been steadily more difficult to see just how influential Zürich remained in European Reformed life. Part of the problem has been that much of that

⁶For a more sympathetic critique than mine of the Finnish school from an Anglophone historian of the Reformation, see Hendrix, 256–58.

⁷Benedict.

influence was exercised in Eastern Europe, in churches effectively lost to Western historians, either because of their decline in the seventeenth century or their political isolation from the West between the 1930s and the 1980s. So Bullinger is only now emerging as a statesman of continent-wide importance, exemplified by the studies of Andreas Mühling and Mark Taplin, while Jan Łaski still awaits his full due, at least among historians in Western Europe and the United States.⁸

It is not simply Łaski who waits to reemerge from the former Iron Curtain lands. As we recover the story of the Eastern European Reformations, and realize the richness and variety that they encompassed, we may become more vividly aware of the radical dimension of the Reformation that remains so patchily explored, despite the magnificent and encyclopedic four-decades-old survey of G. H. Williams.⁹ In doing so, we follow Williams in recovering a properly balanced history of religious toleration, as we discover the roots of the toleration of religious dissidence in Eastern European lands. The English have had a complacent habit of congratulating themselves on their tolerance. In religious terms, they are sadly deceived. Not only did the brief reign of Catholic Mary see a massive crop of burnings for heresy without any precedent in the Kingdom of England, but the English Protestant Reformation as a whole judicially executed more Catholics than any other part of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If one were to look for toleration in Western Europe before the 1680s, one would naturally look, not to England, but either to France in the era of the Edict of Nantes, or the *de facto* pluralism evolved in the northern Netherlands. More significantly, one would look east: to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in its glory days after the Confederation of Warsaw in 1573, or the Transylvanian Diet's pioneering declaration at Torda in 1568. It is sad that we remember Transylvania for Count Dracula, who never existed, rather than for its role as the first Christian state officially to declare that everyone ought to be able to worship God in their own way without interference.

There is much to still do in the study of radicalism. As David Steinmetz and David Bagchi observed in their own recent thoughts on "directions of future research," we have so far had much more investigation of Anabaptists than of apparent maverick figures like Bernardino Ochino or the Soz(z)ini

⁸See Mühling; Taplin. There is still not much Anglophone literature on Łaski: see instead (mostly) in German, Strohm; and in Polish, Bartel; Kowalska.

⁹Williams.

uncle and nephew.¹⁰ Some radicals have been resurrected for modern purposes, like the curious canonization of Thomas Müntzer (ca. 1489–1525) by the old German Democratic Republic as a proto-Communist — admittedly, Müntzer’s pumpkinification was more convincing than the awkward shoehorning of Martin Luther into a similar role during his quincentenary celebrations in 1983.¹¹ Other radicals have been firmly distanced from modern ecclesiastical concerns. It is interesting that the doctrine of the celestial flesh of Christ is more commonly associated with the visionary prophet of militant Anabaptism Melchior Hoffmann (ca. 1500–ca. 1543), and so styled “Melchiorite,” than with his gentle pacifist successor Menno Simons (1496–1561) and the later Mennonite Churches. The difference may be that there are no Melchiorites left, but there are plenty of Mennonites, who have generally not been anxious to remember this particular heterodox aspect of their founder’s doctrine.

Here we are beginning to uncover the problem of ancestor-worship. Those who have few or no descendants tend to get marginalized in the historical record: something that affects not only Melchiorite Christology, but magisterial Reformers, like Bucer, who have no institutional successors, or Jan Łaski, whose Polish Reformed Church has become tiny and is only now finding its voice in a post-Communist world. Unitarians have celebrated and explored their origins over the years, but they too have experienced decline rather than expansion, not merely in the European homeland but amid the general decline of liberal Christianity in Europe and the United States. A parallel story could be told of Anabaptist history: these histories have tended to remain literally parochial. It is vital for historians from outside the traditions to take up the exploration because it is the only way to gain a rounded picture of the Reformation. One needs to jump across the barriers created by the developed Reformation and Counter-Reformation and make connections which may be unexpected.

One of these long trails is provoked by a splendidly suggestive article of 1996 by Jerome Friedman.¹² He takes as his starting point the culture wars and real wars in Spain in the 1490s which destroyed two of the three great Spanish monotheisms, Judaism and Islam. The suppression of Spanish Judaism gave energy to the *alumbrado* movement, and formed the background for such mainstream figures of Christian mysticism as the

¹⁰Steinmetz and Bagchi, 255.

¹¹For a characteristically trenchant contemporary witness of the 1983 Luther celebrations, see Elton, 1984; for a good survey of changing perspectives in the literature on Müntzer during the 1980s, see Stayer.

¹²Friedman.

converso-descended Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and St. John of the Cross (1542–91). However, it also escaped into the *Spirituali* movement of Italy, principally in the person of the self-exiled Juan de Valdés (1490?–1541). Not surprisingly, one element in this more radical form of *Spirituale* piety was a skepticism about the developed doctrine of the Trinity. When the *Spirituali* were routed in the power struggles of the Italian Church in 1540s, there was little incentive for their more steadfast adherents to remain orthodox to the doctrines of a Church which was becoming their enemy. Many of these radical Italians fled along the trading routes which had long taken Italians to Eastern Europe: hence the presence of such radicals as the Soz(z)ini duo in Poland. From the Unitarianism of Poland came the Socinianism of late seventeenth-century Western Europe, and with it much of the impetus for what Jonathan Israel has termed the “Radical Enlightenment.”¹³ Thus the circle moves over two centuries from post-expulsion Spain to pluralistic Amsterdam and London. The Spanish Inquisition should have been keen students of the law of unintended consequences.

It is not the business of those involved in the history of their own chosen confessional traditions to make such connections. I am not saying that historians with a confessional allegiance are not worthy of their place in Reformation studies. I think of the empathy which Graeme Murdock has brought from his own Presbyterian background to his pioneering Anglophone study of the Reformed tradition in Hungary and Transylvania.¹⁴ Equally, I could instance the honesty and originality of historians such as John O’Malley, who has revolutionized our understanding of his own Society of Jesus, or of the courageously iconoclastic work of the Carmelite historian Richard Copsey on the Carmelites’ unblushing remolding of their origins and history.¹⁵ When one has admired achievements of such affectionate but properly detached scholarship, it may still be expected that the task of making connections may be easier for those standing outside the tradition, by origin or choice. Here the synthetic work of Philip Benedict stands as an exemplar: he proclaims his origins as “a total outsider, an agnostic, nonpracticing Jew raised in a secular household.”¹⁶

Overall, it is easier for the historian without confessional commitment to listen to the sound of silence. There is much significant silence in the

¹³Israel.

¹⁴Murdock.

¹⁵O’Malley, 1993; Copsey.

¹⁶Benedict, xxv.

record of the Reformation. Silences may arise either from considered conviction or from generally-well-justified fear: the former characterized the Family of Love, so usefully and surprisingly reconsidered in recent years, and both elements inspired Nicodemites, also a subject of much recent interest.¹⁷ Such silences are particularly characteristic of those who at the time were defined as sexual deviants: homosexuals were so successfully silent in the Reformation era as to convince some modern historians who ought to know better that homosexual consciousness was a mental construct of the nineteenth century. In my own survey of the Reformation, I did my best amid two chapters entitled “Love and Sex” to listen to the silence of gay people. Even though these two chapters are largely a sympathetic account of the reassertion of the value of heterosexual marriage in the sixteenth century, it was interesting how loud my few remarks on homosexuality sounded in some peoples’ ears. Various Roman Catholic and conservative Evangelical critics united in saying that these two chapters let down the rest of the book: an interesting tribute to the culture wars over sex which now so afflict the West, and the United States in particular.

So I end with a plea to students of the Reformation to go on listening for the silences: asking what might have been, and seeking to see past the identities created by later centuries, to find women and men of conscience or lack of it, struggling to create identities for themselves, without the aid of hindsight to provide handy labels for what they thought they were doing.

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3. ENCOUNTERING THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

by MARY LAVEN*

While the Reformation has, from the very beginning, been seen as a drama which drew its cast from every sphere of society, the Counter-Reformation was until recently considered the project of elites. Even those who sought to write the social history of the Catholic reform movement allocated to “the people” the role of resisting the course of change rather than contributing to the transformation of early modern Catholicism. Swimming against this tide, a succession of local case studies, focusing in particular on rituals and objects, has demonstrated the manifold ways in which men and women of all social backgrounds participated in the reinvention of Roman

¹⁷Starting points on the Familists are Hamilton; Marsh. On Nicodemism, see Zagorin; for a more recent treatment, see Overell.

*For comments and advice on earlier versions of this article, I am grateful to Jason Scott-Warren, Simon Ditchfield, and Ulinka Rublack.

Catholicism. This paper considers new emphases in the social and cultural history of the Counter-Reformation, and asks whether there remains a place for thinking about the age of reform in terms of discipline and confessionalization.

Decadence, opulence, excess, clutter. Sculptures that are life-sized, over-life-sized, lifelike, over-lifelike, complete with wigs, eyelashes, and tears. Paintings that flaunt the Catholic doctrines — purgatory, the saints, transubstantiation, good works — in a deliberately aggressive, asking-for-a-fight manner. A crudely propagandistic, competitive phase of Catholicism, propped up, it might appear, as much by marble pillars and gilded statuary, as by the pious simplicity that the Catholic reformers had once invoked. For many, regardless of their confessional allegiances, the material and visual outpourings of baroque Catholicism present its very worst side. Much argued about by art historians, it is an aspect of the Counter-Reformation that has tended to be neglected or marginalized by historians of religion, despite its undoubted centrality to the experience of the Catholic faithful in the centuries following the Council of Trent (1545–63).¹⁸

The Counter-Reformation, as is well-known, began life as a negative concept. The term *Gegenreformation* was coined in the late eighteenth century by German Protestant historians looking back on the repressive activities of Catholic authorities in the aftermath of the Peace of Augsburg (1555), most notably during the Thirty Years' War (1618–48). One might imagine that the excesses of Catholic art and devotional culture would have been grist to the mill of those establishing a critique of post-Tridentine Catholicism. In fact, relics and virgins, gold and glitter, had little place in the earliest histories of the Counter-Reformation. Their focus was on military, political, and diplomatic events rather than on devotion or culture. During the course of the nineteenth century, as Lutheran historians such as Leopold von Ranke and Wilhelm Maurenbrecher conceded that Catholic renewal predated the first stirrings of Protestantism, attention shifted away from war and politics to piety and prayer, in particular to the early reformers of the Church: the Spanish Primate Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros (1436–1517), the Dominican preacher Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), and the

¹⁸The starting point for any discussion of Counter-Reformation art remains Mâle. For discussion of negative reactions to Counter-Reformation art, see Webster, 8–13. For a recent consideration of the characteristics of Counter-Reformation art, see Bailey, 1999.

founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556). These same figures continued to bulk large in the writings of twentieth-century Catholic historians attempting to rehabilitate the Counter-Reformation as a period of intense spiritual regeneration.¹⁹ But for both Protestant and Catholic scholars it was the austerity and personal discipline of the Pre-Reformation and Tridentine era that attracted respect rather than the later accretions of baroque piety. In his Birkbeck lectures, delivered in Cambridge in 1951 and published posthumously in 1968 as *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*, Outram Evennett sketched a phenomenon whose roots lay far earlier than the Reformation, but whose branches did not grow much beyond the end of the Thirty Years' War. His chapter on "Counter-Reformation Spirituality" was strangely silent on the matter of art and devotional objects.²⁰ By contrast, Pierre Janelle, author of the 1963 study *The Catholic Reformation*, devoted a chapter to art and music in which he expressly lamented how, in the course of the seventeenth-century, "restraint and severity" — the proper characteristics of Catholic art — were supplanted by "a worldlier character," and the early simplicity of Tridentine art was lost beneath baroque "overornamentation."²¹

The most famous critique of such overornamentation came from outside the push-and-pull of confessional history, and was penned in 1935 by the Italian historian and theorist Benedetto Croce in his essay on the baroque.²² For Croce and those whom he cites, *baroque* signified "bad taste," "a sort of artistic ugliness," and that was how the painting, sculpture, buildings, and literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (at least in Italy) could be characterized.²³ He despised the "false dramatic liveliness" of baroque paintings and sculptures, and pronounced that "whereas other forms of the unbeautiful are sometimes arresting, exciting, disquieting, the baroque, for all its agitation and surface warmth, ends by producing the effect of coldness, and for all the multitude of images which it brings on the scene and combines together, of emptiness."²⁴ In an earlier essay of 1928 on the "moral life of seventeenth-century Italy," Croce cast his scorn more explicitly onto the Catholic reforming church, bemoaning its "externalism," the privileging of "ceremonial worship" over charity, the

¹⁹The best account of the development of Counter-Reformation historiography is O'Malley, 2000.

²⁰Evennett, 23–42.

²¹Janelle, 177.

²²Croce, 409–26.

²³Ibid., 411–12.

²⁴Ibid., 415–16.

reification of “orthodoxy” over “understanding,” all of which produced “a morality of bigotry” and an “orthodoxy of decadence.”²⁵

Croce’s vehement disdain for the excesses of baroque Catholicism was born of contemporary concerns. At a time when the Fascists looked back fondly on the Counter-Reformation as a golden age of discipline and authority, Croce responded by portraying the same period as intellectually and morally arid.²⁶ In the 1960s and 70s, a similar preoccupation with the modern world was to shape the course of Counter-Reformation history. The confessionalization thesis, developed by German historians such as Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, posited that the religious reformations — Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist — played a key role in supporting the rise of the modern state, providing both the religious glue to create unified states and the disciplinary mechanisms to enhance authority.²⁷ But whereas Croce had seen the baroque reappearing in the modern world, those of the confessionalizing school tended to project modernity backwards onto the past. Art, devotion, and ritual all had a place in this new history of confessionalization, for they belonged to the armory of control guarded over by church and state authorities. But their more alien spiritual functions were not explored.

The single most striking feature of the recent historiography of the Counter-Reformation is its commitment to taking devotion and its multiple manifestations seriously — however bizarre, unappealing, or “ugly” they might be. This process has been aided by the adoption of anthropological approaches to the past, and has entailed a judicious skepticism regarding conventional models of modernization. Historians, regardless of their own personal religious affiliations (or lack thereof), have of late become sympathetic observers of early modern Catholicism, embracing its peculiarities and reveling in its otherness. This general trend has occurred alongside four more specific developments: a reappraisal of the categories of “popular” and “official” religion; the adoption of a far longer timespan for understanding the Counter-Reformation; an evolving understanding of confessionalization — or, better, *confessionalism* — which breaks free from teleological narratives, and which acknowledges the manifold ways in which men and women of all social backgrounds participated in the reinvention of Roman Catholicism; and a new fascination with the material culture of Catholicism.

The fate of “popular religion” over the last fifteen years or so is an

²⁵Ibid., 1036–54.

²⁶O’Malley, 2000, 34–35.

²⁷On the genesis and development of the confessionalization thesis, see *ibid.*, 108–17.

interesting story, for it appears eventually to have been killed off by those very historians who were most interested in it: that is, by those who sought to look beyond the decrees of Trent and the reforming agenda of ecclesiastical personnel to consider instead the reception of those reforms by ordinary members of the laity. Of course, the study of “popular religion” as a discrete phenomenon has always been problematic, for we rely in large part on the accounts of inquisitors and missionaries, state officials and busybody bishops to reconstruct the beliefs and practices of “the people.” And then there is the question of what is meant by *the people*. Does it refer to the laity, as opposed to the clergy? Or does it signify the poor and uneducated — a category that might include many parish priests — in opposition to society’s elites, lay and clerical? Finally, if a class distinction is implied, can we deny that princes were as likely as peasants to participate in unorthodox religious devotions? Such problems prompted William Christian, in his 1981 survey of religion in Castile during the reign of Philip II, to advocate the term *local* in preference to *popular* religion.²⁸ Meanwhile, in an article of 1990, Craig Harline pointed out that the enthusiasm for popular religion — which he still perceived as dominating the historiography of the 1980s — had the effect of homogenizing and oversimplifying official religion. Given the complexity and inextricability of both, he urged historians to pursue the idea of “cultural negotiation” in seeking to delineate the processes of religious change, and to do so in relation to local studies.²⁹

This was precisely the approach that dominated a succession of excellent case studies published during the course of the 1990s. These richly demonstrated that the Counter-Reformation was not a one-way process, not just reformers imposing their values on the laity; nor was there a head-on clash between reformers and reformed. Rather, there was a dialectic in which, to greater or lesser effect, literally anyone could participate.

Change was wrought partly as a result of compromise. The Jesuits and Redemptorists who entered the Terra d’Otranto in southern Italy — the locale of David Gentilcore’s 1992 study, *From Bishop to Witch* — fired a volley of ammunition against the religion that they encountered. Their target was not, of course, Protestantism, but the ignorant and unorthodox beliefs and superstitions that prevailed under the aegis of the Catholic Church. In their nine-day missions they preached with “terrorizing eloquence” and used the catechism and the confessional as well as theater and

²⁸Christian, 8.

²⁹Harline, 250–51, 253–54.

ritual to indoctrinate the people in the correct tenets of the Catholic faith.³⁰ But for all their show the missionaries realized that they could not afford to jeopardize their position by dismantling the belief structures on which the laity depended. And so, while they tried to root out the most reprehensible and superstitious aspects of popular religion, they maintained an extended stock of approved ecclesiastical remedies to fulfil the material and psychological demands of the people. In particular, the missionaries had at their disposal a wide repertoire of sacramentals: material objects such as holy water, relics, or crosses, which could be ritually invoked to heal or to protect people from sickness or evil spells. Strictly speaking, these sacramentals were not efficacious in themselves, but derived their power only when performed in a proper liturgical context, and only with the intervention of God. But the distinction between correct and incorrect usage was often blurred, and local priests tolerated or even participated in non-approved uses of blessed objects, especially when under pressure from their parishioners. The reformers were aware that their perceived power to solve the problems of everyday life gave them a hold over the laity which could never be maintained by sermons alone. They distributed holy water, statuettes, and cheap prints of saints to the laity, who treasured these objects, believing that they would protect their homes. Prayer and the practice of crossing oneself were also promoted on the grounds that they offered a form of protection to the believer. The missionaries handed out religious medals, prayer books, and *abitini di Maria* (small cloth pouches, worn about the neck or sewn into the clothes to protect the wearer), all of which were seized upon by the local people for their potential efficacy in solving or preventing the difficulties of life.

Such exchanges suggest continuity between the Pre-Reformation and the Post-Reformation church. But the end result was something new and distinctive. The process of change is well illustrated by the case of the rosary. Conceived by the missionaries as a tool of meditation and prayer, intended to focus the mind of the individual intensely upon Christ and the Virgin Mary, rosaries were distributed and received with equal enthusiasm. But in the rural communities of southern Italy and elsewhere, the rosary was quickly transformed to become a holy object in its own right, capable, like the relics of saints, of miraculous feats. Notwithstanding such doctrinal tensions, the rosary would become a widespread feature of Counter-Reformation piety, purveying different meanings to its varied adherents.³¹

³⁰Gentilcore, 68–69.

³¹*Ibid.*, 97–99.

In an inspiring article of 1996 entitled “Blood, Tears and Xavier-Water,” Trevor Johnson pushed the argument one step further. His subject — the Jesuits’ “hit-and-run” evangelizing tours of the Upper Palatinate — might have looked ripe for treatment as a demonstration of state-sponsored, top-down confessionalization.³² The territory, annexed by the Duke of Bavaria during the course of the Thirty Years’ War, underwent a consistent policy of recatholicization — Counter-Reformation in its original sense — and the Jesuits, along with other religious orders, were invited to play a key role in this process. But Johnson’s study is situated nearly a hundred years later in a subsequent phase of recatholicization, as the laity had a habit of returning to their old heretical ways as soon as the missionaries’ backs were turned. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Jesuits had recognized that it was necessary to adapt their techniques in order to engage the devotional energies of local communities. This they achieved both by fostering the penitential urges of the laity, whipping up their emotions with theatrical sermons, and, again, by promoting sacramentals. As with the missionaries in the Terra d’Otranto, their methods entailed a productive blending of old and new.

The mission reports gleefully recount the effects of the sermons: “Weeping, wailing and loud lamentations were heard from the audience. Women, noblemen and priests alike were drenched in tears, and it was noticeable that the non-Catholics who had come in order to make fun and sport were actually the first to break into public weeping and wailing.”³³ But setting aside the Jesuits’ triumphalist claims, it is clear that their tactics were effective in provoking collective emotional responses. There was a long tradition of suffering and self-inflicted pain in Catholic devotion that had thrived in confraternities of the late medieval period. So the Jesuits’ call to mourning and self-mortification permitted a continuity with earlier threads of Catholic spirituality, but infused them with a confessional militancy.

Likewise, in their use of sacramentals, the Jesuits of the Upper Palatinate coated a Pre-Reformation strategy with a Counter-Reformation gloss. They were responsible for consecrating gallons of so-called “Xavier-water,” into which they dunked relics and medals of Saint Francis Xavier, the great Jesuit missionary who had been canonized in the seventeenth century. Xavier-water — and its close relative, “Ignatius-water” — was proposed and perceived as an all-purpose wonder cure for fevers, blindness, paralysis, and the complications of pregnancy. During a Jesuit mission in

³²Johnson, 184.

³³Ibid., 192.

1736, the peasantry sprinkled Ignatius-water on their fields to exterminate a plague of caterpillars. Clearly we have to look carefully at the Jesuit investment in these events. Miracles accomplished by Xavier-water and other sacramentals provided by the Jesuits might have been a cheap and cynical way of buying popular support. Perhaps the Jesuits saw the miracles as merely a means to an end. But Johnson rejects such an interpretation. He sees as significant that the Jesuits recorded the wondrous occurrences so carefully in the internal records of their order. In his view, the later stages of the Counter-Reformation had brought about a “culture of the miraculous” shared by both laity and clerical elite.³⁴

The glut of publications that came out in the 1990s, arising from detailed investigation of religious practices at a local level, caused the unstable relationship between popular and official religion to wobble. But the single case study that gently pushed that relationship head over heels was Marc Forster’s 1992 book on the Bishopric of Speyer in southwest Germany, *The Counter-Reformation in the Villages*. Conditions in Speyer were very different from those in both Terra d’Otranto and the Upper Palatinate. For while Speyer belonged to the confessionally fragmented world of southern Germany, it resists the model of militant confessionalization which has been applied to many of its neighbors. According to Forster, in this small and geographically incoherent territory, state building and social discipline were alien concepts. So, in the context of an unambitious state and a moderate church, the impetus for religious reform came largely from the laity. Here the people were the agents in embracing some aspects of the Tridentine reformation and rejecting others. Thus they demanded the appointment of committed clergy who would reside in the parish, but they resisted efforts to limit popular festivities and reorganize parish administration. The forms of Counter-Reformation piety that emphasized frequent confession and communion, individual prayer, and austere self-discipline had little resonance in the rural parishes of Speyer. The Society of Jesus was not influential, and there is evidence that Jesuit priests were occasionally assaulted by the villagers. The Catholic renewal that occurred in the Bishopric of Speyer evolved from within the local community. The villagers favored a community-oriented piety with a focus on weekly religious services, the Mass, processions, and local pilgrimages.

While there exists a well-established tradition of looking at the

³⁴Ibid., 202. Johnson’s claim is amply borne out by Soergel, whose study focuses on the pilgrimages — events that were at once promoted from above and from below — that animated the Counter-Reformation landscape of Bavaria, but which drew so heavily on medieval tradition.

Protestant Reformation “from below,” the Counter-Reformation is seldom perceived from this angle. By his emphasis on the agency and participation of the rural population of Speyer, Forster effectively introduced this possibility. But the concept of negotiation still holds good, for the people of Speyer did not introduce Catholic renewal in isolation. They required the assistance of committed priests, and they negotiated with the somewhat lackadaisical cathedral authorities in Speyer through the mediation of their clergy.

Forster’s more recent monograph, *Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque*, published in 2001, develops and expands his argument in relation to a broader swath of southwest Germany. Adopting a timespan that goes from the Council of Trent to the middle of the eighteenth century, he perceives the flowering of baroque Catholicism to have occurred after 1650, and to have manifested itself in a proliferation of churches, pilgrimages, saints, devotions, and church services.³⁵ In opposition to the spirit of Trent, the Catholic rural population resisted the regularization and systematization of their religion, engaging instead in its diversification and elaboration. The destruction and neglect of chapels and shrines during the Reformation and Thirty Years’ War provided ample scope for programs of rebuilding post-1650. And, given the use of the same architects in the design of the great monasteries, parish churches, and pilgrimage shrines, Forster argues that there was “no clear boundary between the art and architecture patronized and appreciated by the Catholic elite and by the Catholic peasants.”³⁶

In different ways, Gentilcore, Johnson, and Forster all address the question of agency in the Counter-Reformation. Their conclusions are subtly different, as one would expect from three historians working on three rather different environments. In southern Italy, missionaries adapted their strategies to accommodate the needs of the local population. In the Upper Palatinate, Trevor Johnson sees not so much compromise and accommodation from the Jesuits as an evolving culture of penitence and miracles, shared and developed by priests and layfolk. In the rural areas of southwest Germany, where political and religious authority were weaker, Marc Forster sees the impetus for Catholic regeneration as coming from below.

³⁵This chronological lengthening of the Counter-Reformation is characteristic of the work of Gentilcore and Johnson, as well as of Forster. See also Beales, 27, who claims that “It was in the middle years of the eighteenth century that the Counter-Reformation reached its apogee.”

³⁶Forster, 2001, 77.

These three examples all implicitly or explicitly challenge the models of confessionalization and social discipline that, during the course of the 1970s and '80s, had so influenced the history of religion in Central Europe and, to an extent, Italy. Forster's argument is particularly helpful in proposing an alternative model of confessionalism — in other words, conceding that the Counter-Reformation period was crucial in the creation of confessional identities, but insisting that those identities were not necessarily imposed from above, and in the service of secular authority.³⁷ By the late seventeenth century, the Catholic villagers of southwest Germany took pride in their shrines and pilgrimages, and reviled those who ate meat during Lent. Where once they had cared little about clerical concubinage — so long as a priest was resident and able to perform the Last Rites or baptize newborn children — they came to view the celibate clergy as a badge of confessional identity, distinguishing them from their Protestant neighbors. The villagers no longer tolerated concubinage and were suspicious of any dealings between women and priests. But this development had little to do with either the Council of Trent or the policies of confessionalizing states. The new Catholic identity was being created on the ground.

Of course, confessionalization did take place elsewhere.³⁸ In Counter-Reformation Bavaria, it would be strange to deny the role of the state in imposing confessional uniformity upon the people. And in post-Tridentine Milan, nobody could accuse the local bishop of taking a back seat when it came to instituting the structures that were intended to lead to a regulated religion and a disciplined people. So it is interesting to see how recent historians, imbued with the new social and cultural approaches to the Counter-Reformation, have gone about treating the hardline, authoritarian examples of religious reform.

In his 2001 monograph *The Conquest of the Soul*, Wietse de Boer presents a cogent account of what he calls “an extraordinary social experiment,” in which the Milanese diocesan authorities, under Archbishop Cardinal Carlo Borromeo “launched a concerted and full-scale effort to

³⁷Forster, 1992, 1–9; Forster, 2001, 12–15.

³⁸By focusing in this article on the role of ordinary people in shaping Counter-Reformation Catholicism, I do not mean to play down the repressive policies of those authorities, secular and religious, who were dedicated to imposing reform. In particular, the activities of the Inquisitions contributed essentially to the form of Catholicism after Trent. For an uncompromisingly negative account of Inquisition-led confessionalization in the Italian peninsula, see Prosperi.

transform the social order by reaching into the consciences of its subjects.”³⁹ The book consists of two parts: the first studies “the Borromeo program of penitential discipline from the ideal and prescriptive angle”; the second “focuses on its implementation and results.”⁴⁰ It is, of course, in the gaps between ideal and implementation that the most interesting material is to be found. And even within the context of this seemingly most unilateral program of reform, one quickly discovers a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices.

De Boer’s account of the authorities’ obsessive concern with infant suffocation — the death of babies, in bed with their parents, presumed to have been smothered — gives a taste of the realities of reform.⁴¹ Almost from the beginning of his episcopate, Borromeo and his men busied themselves directly with “this serious and enormous crime.”⁴² The diocesan deliberations on the matter did not go into the question of causation, but simply assumed guilt based on sinful negligence on the part of the mother, or occasionally wet nurse or father. The Fourth Provincial Council (1576) issued a coercive decree: any woman who kept an infant less than one year old in her bed “without such caution as the bishop deemed necessary” was *ipso facto* excommunicated. Yet, as de Boer points out, “Borromeo’s high-minded principle and his legalistic approach were to clash with the complexities of social life,” and with the “difficulties” experienced by parish priests and confessors.⁴³ At the 1582 Sixth Provincial Council, the matter was put on the table once again, and feedback was sought from around the diocese. The reports demonstrate both the compassion of regional prelates, as they detailed the precarious situations in which mothers and their children sought to survive, and their frustration with the inflexible line being peddled by their archbishop. How could a mother warm, comfort, and feed a crying, cold, or sick child if not by taking it into bed? And, as for the so-called “caution” prescribed by the diocesan regulations — namely that mothers were allowed to have their babies in bed provided that they kept them in small wooden boxes — how feasible was this, when a bed was shared by husband, wife, and the rest of the family? And was the wooden box really compatible with breast-feeding? A letter from the provost of Gallarete relayed the comments of nursing mothers: “And they say they can’t move the wooden box to their other side both because of the danger

³⁹de Boer, ix.

⁴⁰Ibid., 3.

⁴¹Ibid., 237–45.

⁴²Ibid., 238.

⁴³Ibid.

of hurting the baby in the dark of night, and because of her husband and children, who are in the same bed. It follows that the baby suffers because when the one breast is empty they cannot switch to the other.”⁴⁴ Back in Milan, Borromeo and his advisors took on board the information that they were receiving. It was agreed that in certain cases — taking into account poverty, ill health, or, alternatively, the robust size and vigor of babies over nine months — dispensations would be granted to permit women to keep their infants in bed with them.⁴⁵ But the investigation had revealed another problem: that women were staying away from the confessional during the first year of their child’s life, in order to avoid the probing questions of their confessors. Some priests reported that “few women now confess this crime or are ashamed of it,” others asked helplessly “what to do with those [women] who when recounting this sin to their confessors laughed about it, as if it were a joke.”⁴⁶ As de Boer comments, such rare glimpses into the confessional show “how penitents, disturbed by a measure that baffled their sense of the reasonable and acceptable, responded with a mixture of pragmatism, irony, and defiance.”⁴⁷

Needless to say, Borromeo and his colleagues did not see the funny side of it. They proclaimed that women “who confess without reverence and shame be rejected,” and that those who denied having sinned be considered impenitent.⁴⁸ But while the Milanese authorities huffed and puffed and regulated anew, the issue of infant suffocation clearly signaled the limits of their disciplinary system.

Another study that deals with a full-scale, monumental, highly-interventionist program of reform is Ulrike Strasser’s 2004 monograph, *State of Virginity*. This time, the motor of change was a secular authority: Bavaria’s most staunchly Catholic prince and leader of the Catholic League during the Thirty Years’ War, the Elector Maximilian I. The leitmotif of his reforms was the colossal pillar of the Virgin Mary that he commissioned to give thanks for the city’s deliverance from Protestant troops, and which was erected in 1638 in the central square of Munich. But state-sponsored Marian devotion did not stop there. Laws decreed that every man and woman in Bavaria had to carry a rosary, and to go down on their knees to utter the Ave Maria three times a day at the sound of church bells. Such policies, Strasser argues, extolled Maximilian and the Wittelsbach dynasty

⁴⁴Ibid., 240.

⁴⁵Ibid., 241.

⁴⁶Ibid., 242.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 243.

as the defenders of orthodoxy, while at the same time extracting compliance from the dynasty's subjects and habituating them to the observance of religious norms that legitimated state rule. The devotional program was mirrored by a disciplinary campaign, pursued in the name of piety and the social order, against "profligacy," or nonmarital sex. During the crisis years of the Thirty Years' War, virginity had come to symbolize "a community's intactness, innocence, and determination to fend off enemies," while "to give up one's virginity willingly outside of marriage symbolized surrender of the city's incorruptibility."⁴⁹ Midwives were encouraged to turn in "profligate" women to the city authorities. Virginity was an ideal energetically pursued, not just through the cult of Our Lady, but in the law courts of Counter-Reformation Munich.

Thus the full force of Catholic ideology was harnessed to the emerging state — a demonstration of the confessionalization thesis, we might think, if ever there was one. But Strasser's evidence does not, she insists, fit the model of Reinhard and Schilling. For a start, she rejects their assumptions about modernization and secularization — the idea that religion, having done its service to political authority, will be pushed to one side by a state gaining in strength and sovereignty. To the contrary, she argues that "religion did not simply fall by the wayside during the metamorphosis of the early modern into the modern state. The case of Bavaria suggests that the triumph of modern statehood is better understood not in terms of the state's ability to overcome religion but rather of its ability to absorb desirable religious influences and to push the undesirable ones into a newly created sphere of individual morality and privacy."⁵⁰

If this is the overarching conclusion of Strasser's study, there is much more along the way that refines our understanding of how the process of confessionalization was experienced. Central to this process, the book contends, was gender, a growth area of Counter-Reformation historiography — though the vast literature on Counter-Reformation nuns is still to be matched in relation to laywomen, and masculinity remains a neglected subject. Strasser, in company with most other historians of early modern gender today, finds patriarchy an inadequate paradigm for looking at the power relations of men and women during this period, since it incorrectly assumes that the world was divided into public and private spheres, and that men acted in the former while women were controlled within the latter. In reality, women assumed governance through the public and political space of the household — "the smallest political building block of

⁴⁹Strasser, 2004, 104.

⁵⁰Ibid., 7.

early modern rule” — and, in Catholic society, through the public interfaces of the enclosed convent.⁵¹ By opening up alternative sites of power, gender historians have further challenged our assumptions about the history of confessionalization. The virginity policies of the Wittelsbach dynasty might look like hardline assertions of patriarchal power, oppressing women in the name of state aggrandizement, but there were manifold ways in which women could subvert and negotiate that power.

By studies such as these the history of Catholic confessionalization has been unyoked from the old story of the rising state as the harbinger of modernity. In the process, historians have been forced to consider early modern religion on its own, foreign terms, a process which requires a mixture of detachment and empathy.⁵² This approach has meant that scholars now try to get to grips with that strange aspect of baroque devotion that once seemed to embarrass historians of the Counter-Reformation: the emotionality and theatricality of it all. For Susan Verdi Webster in her fine study *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain*, which focuses on the processional sculpture of Holy Week in Seville, far from leaving the spectator cold (as Croce would have it), the processions — with their carved and gilded floats adorned with orange blossoms and rosemary, heralded by trumpets, drums, fifes and bells, incense-bearers, and barefoot flagellants — made an irresistible assault on the senses. Webster takes the wigs and the false eyelashes, the satin and glass, out of the purview of the horrified art historian and understands it instead in terms of material culture animated by ritual.⁵³ She also emphasizes the importance of confraternities in creating baroque processional sculptures and images. They were not imposed on the laity by either civic or ecclesiastical authorities, but rather emerged from those independent, often wayward, communities of artisans: ordinary people pursuing piety on their own terms.

In the wake of Bob Scribner’s pioneering work on the place of ritual, art, and objects in Protestant religion, we certainly cannot claim that Catholics monopolized the visual and the material, leaving Protestants only the word. But we can say that the proliferation of objects — pilgrimage souvenirs, rosaries, sacramentals, relics both clothed and bejeweled, processional sculptures — played a crucial role in creating a new and

⁵¹Ibid., 7–10.

⁵²This trend is not limited to early modernists, and is exemplified in the influential work of Caroline Walker Bynum on late medieval piety, or the revealing study of Lourdes by Ruth Harris.

⁵³Other studies that have shed light on the material culture of Counter-Reformation Catholicism include Calvi; Strasser, 1999; Hills.

distinctive form of Catholicism in which everyone, lay and clerical, men and women, old and young, could participate.

I have avoided entering into what Simon Ditchfield has called “the Punch-and-Judy show” that is the “Counter-Reformation” versus “Catholic Reformation” debate.⁵⁴ Perhaps, as John O’Malley has suggested, we should adopt the more inclusive, more neutral term *early modern Catholicism*.⁵⁵ But the recent historiography of this period has, I think, done much to vindicate the older term *Counter-Reformation*, both because it acknowledges the novelty of the phenomenon and because it forces us to consider it comparatively.⁵⁶ This was indeed a new phase in the history of Catholicism, and its manifestations can only be understood by thinking in terms of relationships, negotiations, and encounters.

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4. THE ENGLISH REFORMATION AFTER REVISIONISM

by EAMON DUFFY

For a generation, writing about the English Reformation has been dominated by debates about the character, pace, and popularity of the transition from Catholic to Protestant belief and practice in England. These “revisionist” debates have had a regrettable tendency to produce artificial polarities from a complex set of processes, and some recent studies, such as Norman Jones’s The English Reformation, Eamon Duffy’s Voices of Morebath, and Ethan Shagan’s Popular Politics and the English Reformation, have attempted to move beyond these polarities to consider the processes by which England became Protestant. This paper surveys some of these studies and attempts an overview of the state of English Reformation historiography.

Whenever I am asked to speak about revisionism in Reformation history I am reminded of a scene in the movie *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which some of you may recall features Glenda Jackson and Peter Finch. One of the funniest scenes in the film depicts a West London cocktail party at which a perpetually quarrelling married couple erupt into loud and embarrassing confrontation, to the bored dismay of

⁵⁴Ditchfield, 387.

⁵⁵O’Malley, 2000, 5.

⁵⁶On the importance of adopting a comparative perspective, see Davis, 335. Such an approach has particular significance for those addressing the Counter-Reformation on a global scale: see, for example, Bailey, 2001; Greer and Bilinkoff.

their friends, who have seen it all before: the quarrelling wife, in a self-dramatizing spiral of hysteria, begins to strip off her clothing, upon which, from the fringes of the party, a world-weary voice remarks, "Oh God, here come those tired old tits again."

I am anxious to avoid a similar sense of *déjà vu* on the part of those of you familiar with recent debate about the English Reformation. The conflicting positions in that debate are all too easily characterized in terms of simple polarities — slow reformation from above, rapid reformation from below, or, as Norman Jones in self-conscious caricature has recently put it, "Once upon a time the people of England were happy medieval Catholics, visiting their holy wells, attending frequent masses and deeply respectful of Purgatory and afraid of hell. Then lustful King Henry forced them to abandon their religion. England was never merry again. Alternatively, once upon a time the people of England were oppressed by corrupt churchmen. They yearned for the liberty of the Gospel. Then, Good King Harry gave them the Protestant nation for which they longed."⁵⁷

Nobody, I take it, would nowadays admit to holding either of these contrasted positions in their chemical purity, but they represent recognizable approaches all the same. It is true that in any hard and fast sense the revisionist model of the Reformation is largely a critical construct, for the differences between revisionists are at least as significant as their agreements. It is, for example, a fundamental contention of *The Stripping of the Altars* that the Reformation represented a deep and traumatic cultural hiatus, a notion that has been taken up in literary terms and taken for a walk by authors as various as Stephen Greenblatt and Ted Hughes. By contrast, it is a fundamental contention of Christopher Haigh's masterly and mischievous *English Reformations*, that when the dust had settled on all the crown-imposed religious upheavals, nothing very much had in fact happened.⁵⁸ The revisionist position takes its name, I suppose, from the title of the collection of essays edited in 1987 by Christopher Haigh, *The English Reformation Revised*.⁵⁹ The contributors to this volume, it should be noted, were in no sense a movement, and they shared no single agenda. Insofar as the essays had something in common, it was a sense that the Reformation process in England had been precisely that — a process and a labor, difficult, drawn out, and whose outcome had been by no means a foregone conclusion — and perhaps also a more positive assessment both of the activities of Tudor proponents of Catholicism such as Bishops

⁵⁷Jones, 1.

⁵⁸For a generalizing discussion which tends to conflate several varieties of revisionism as a unitary phenomenon, see the introduction to Tyacke, 1–32.

⁵⁹Haigh, 1987.

Longland or Bonner, and of the traditional religion which the reformers assailed. But it is worth noting that the insight that the Reformation had not been achieved on a tidal wave of popular enthusiasm, but had to be worked for, by force, persuasion, and slow institutional transformation, did not originate with card-carrying revisionists. The year before Haigh's collection appeared, Patrick Collinson gave the Anstey lectures, subsequently published as *The Birthpangs of Protestant England*.⁶⁰ The published version opened with the ringing declaration that "if I were to be asked when Protestant England was born I would answer . . . after the accession of Elizabeth I, some considerable time after."⁶¹ Collinson dedicated the book to Geoffrey Dickens: unsurprisingly, Dickens was not greatly delighted by it, and perhaps did not quite know what to make of the dedication which credited him with having both "led and pointed the way" — given that Collinson assumed that the story of the birth of English Protestantism began more or less at the point where Dickens's history of the Reformation left off.

And, speaking autobiographically, the book which contributed most to my own perception of the contested character of the Tudor Reformations was no revisionist work, but Geoffrey Elton's masterpiece, *Policy and Police*, published in 1972 when revisionism was barely a twinkle in Christopher Haigh's infant eye. Elton, insofar as he was interested in religion at all, explicitly endorsed Dickens's conviction that by the end of Edward's reign England was more or less ineradicably Protestant. Nevertheless, his use of Cromwell's postbag to chart both widespread popular resistance to, and criticism of, the Henrician Reformation, and the regime's systematic use of both power and persuasion to forward it, seems to me to have set the agenda for much subsequent work.

So, a good deal of what is now described as revisionism has nothing to do with a conscious revisionary agenda, but is just the routine work of historians doing what historians always do or are supposed to do, trying to get a clearer picture of what happened in the past. For example, the more positive reevaluation of late medieval religion — which has been a crucial dimension of recent rethinking of the history of the Reformation — has been to a large extent the work of medievalists only marginally concerned with the pre-history of the Reformation, and working independently of each other: Peter Heath, Christopher Harper-Bill, and Clive Burgess all come to mind. Among historians more directly concerned with the sixteenth century, several are indeed Roman Catholics — Jack Scarisbrick,

⁶⁰Collinson.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, ix.

myself, and, more recently, Richard Rex and Peter Marshall — and this has led to the widespread perception that revisionism represents the unfortunate revival of confessional history, the grinding of papistical axes. This denominational head-counting is a phenomenon more easily accommodated in British academic life than in American, I imagine, but even here it has caused adverse comment. Revisionism is often thought of and referred to as “Catholic revisionism,” so much so that Geoff Dickens simply took it for granted that Christopher Haigh must be a Catholic, and, when it was explained to him that he was not and never had been, exclaimed in exasperation, “then why does he *say* such things?”

It seems extraordinary to me that before the recent debates no one appears to have thought it worth comment that most British Reformation historians were in fact practicing, or at least cultural, Protestants — Dickens himself, Gordon Rupp, Claire Cross, Andrew Pettegree, and many more. This, too, was surely a confessional phenomenon? I should myself attribute the growing presence of Catholics among historians of late medieval and early modern religion at least in part to the accident of the passing of the 1944 Butler Education Act, which led to a postwar flood of Catholics into higher education, and the professionalization of the formerly largely plebeian Catholic community. There are simply more Catholics around in the academy generally than there used to be, but there is indeed a notable Catholic presence among historians of late medieval and early modern religion, not merely English religion but that of Europe more widely. Their influence, I think, has indeed been disproportionate to their actual numbers. If one considers in addition to those already mentioned the names of John Bossy, Peter Burke, the late Bob Scribner, and, I would add, the social anthropologists Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, whose writings have influenced much of this historical thinking about religion, and certainly my own.

This disproportionate presence of Catholics among academic students of early modern and late medieval religion is, I suspect, in part a product of subcultural formation, and the heightened and self-consciously religious preoccupations of a minority group. Its revisionist slant stems, however, less from denominational gladiatorial concerns — since several of the Catholics I have mentioned have been firmly lapsed, their Catholicism cultural rather than ideological — than with the appearance, to anyone formed in a Catholic religious ethos, of the religion of the late middle ages as both more coherent and less repellent than may be the case for historians formed in a different religious tradition. In this sense, “Catholic Revisionism,” insofar as it exists, may represent the absence of a Protestant historiographical agenda at least as much as the presence of a Catholic one.

So, twenty years on from Jack Scarisbrick's Ford lectures and Haigh's *English Reformation Revised*, and a dozen or so years after the appearance of *The Stripping of the Altars* and Haigh's *English Reformations*, where are we on the history of the English Reformation? I think it is fair to say that, while some historians like Diarmaid McCulloch and Andrew Petegree might want to argue for an earlier, wider, and deeper popular dissemination of Protestant ideas than most revisionists would be willing to concede, the broad outline of the revisionist account of the Reformation has been accepted and absorbed into school and university courses. Almost everyone now agrees that "although there were some English people excited about Protestantism in Henry VIII's reign, there was not much popular support for a change," despite which "over the course of three generations the way the English worshipped . . . and related to their place in the universe underwent a sea change."⁶²

Historical inquiry into the English Reformation has therefore shifted now from consideration of the reluctances and resistances to reformation which revisionism highlighted, to that "sea change," the processes by which in the course of those three generations the assimilation of Protestant practice and belief took place. In this sense, my own study, published in 2001, of the conservative Devon village of Morebath and its priest Sir Christopher Trychay from the 1520s to the 1570s, is precisely a "postrevisionist" work.⁶³

I want to consider here, though, two more overtly postrevisionist works, Ethan Shagan's *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, published in 2003, and Norman Jones's *The English Reformation: Religion and Cultural Adaptation*, published in 2002. Jones's book concerns itself with Elizabethan England, Shagan with Henrician and Edwardian England, so I'll consider Shagan's book first. *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* is an example of what I had in mind when I spoke earlier of the profound influence of Elton's *Policy and Police*. Shagan is a first-rate archival historian who has immersed himself in the State Papers Domestic and the records of Star Chamber to document the impact of royal religious policy on the contentious and divided local communities of early Tudor England. Among other things, his book throws a floodlight on the diversity of responses to the imposition of the Royal Supremacy, and helps explain why that divided opposition remained so ineffective. Shagan agrees that relatively few early Tudor Englishmen and -women were ideologically

⁶²Jones, 2.

⁶³Duffy, 2001.

convinced Protestants. He argues, nevertheless, that the pragmatic collaborations of the population at large implicated them in the process of religious change, and made a return to traditional religion in the end impossible. Revisionism, Shagan argues, has seriously underestimated the inexorability of the momentum of reformation, as ordinary men and women profited from the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries, and accustomed themselves to the desacralization of holy things, in the process permanently altering their own internal spiritual landscape and horizons.

There is obviously something in this. But Shagan overstates his case, not least because he has a rather hazy idea of the meaning and limits of the sacred in Early Tudor England. In an illuminating chapter on the looting of the monastery of Hailes in Gloucestershire, shrine of the famous relic of the Holy Blood, Shagan demonstrates that more than seventy local people, of whom fewer than a dozen had any real evangelical beliefs, participated in the clandestine stripping of the monastic buildings. He believes, nevertheless, that those who stole from the building were engaged in religiously transgressive acts: there was the frisson of sacrilege about ripping out the lead from the old holy-water stoups or stealing the prior's floorboards, moving those involved away from their inherited Catholicism. They were not, he tells us, "above stealing expressly devotional objects" such as bell-ropes, and "given that bells were consecrated objects, the theft of a bell rope must have had significant implications."⁶⁴

This is simply mistaken. In Catholic religious practice, holiness is a precise concept, and late medieval Christians did not imagine sacredness as pulsing radioactivity, or a formless fluid sloshing around and sacralizing everything in its vicinity. Bells were indeed blessed objects because they were anointed with holy oil and holy water in official ceremonies conducted by priests. A cracked or worn-out bell, however, just like a redundant chalice destined to be sold for good purposes, could be desacralized simply by ritually tapping it and declaring it to be no longer sacred. Bell-ropes were not sacred ropes by association or holy contagion, they were just ropes. Tudor churchwardens regularly sold off frayed or worn church bell-ropes for profane use. By the same token, the Prior of Hales's floorboards were just floorboards, and the lead lining of holy-water stoups was just lead: those stealing them from an abandoned building might have been thought to have sinned by theft, but they were not brutalizing their own, or anyone else's, religious sensibilities.

In the same way, Shagan overreads other pragmatic gestures by Tudor

⁶⁴Shagan, 190.

parishioners, seeing in them internal and inexorable collaborations with the process of Protestantizing which the evidence will not bear. For example, at Dent in Yorkshire and at neighboring Bentham, parishioners sought in 1548 to preserve chantry-chapels, which served as chapels of ease for people living remote from the parish churches. The Edwardine Commissioners for the Dissolutions recognized the need and allowed these appeals, on condition that the chapels were duly equipped with Bibles, paraphrases, and homilies. Shagan sees in the acceptance of this condition a “Faustian bargain” involving “active acceptance of some of the most important aspects of Edwardian Protestantism.”⁶⁵ By “thinking the unthinkable and admitting the inadmissible” the parishioners gained a practical advantage, but in the process sold the pass.

It is hard to see the matter in quite these terms, though. By 1548 every parish community in England was expected to provide Bible, paraphrases, and homilies, and — with greater or lesser degrees of reluctance or enthusiasm — most of them did so. In agreeing to provide these books for their chapels the people of Dent and Bentham were not going an extra mile towards Protestant conviction, for they were doing no more than they had already done for their parish churches; indeed, what they were now doing was gaining recognition of the quasi-parochial status of their chapels. But we need not imagine they had thereby crossed some sort of Rubicon. Like most other communities in England, I do not doubt that the parishioners of Dent and Bentham surrendered their Bible, homilies, and paraphrases cheerfully enough to Queen Mary’s commissioners, though they may well have lamented the waste of money involved in all this chopping and changing.

I regard Shagan’s book, therefore, as a valuable, if sometimes overexcitable, consolidation of the revisionist account of the Reformation, rather than a move beyond it. Moreover, by halting his study with the reign of Edward, Shagan avoids consideration of the awkward implications for his overall argument of the pragmatic collaborations of parishioners with the Marian recatholicization of England.

By contrast, Norman Jones’s engaging study *Religion and Cultural Adaptation* does not concern itself with shadowboxing with some notional unitary revisionism. Instead, taking it as granted that for many in mid- and late Tudor England the Reformation was unwelcome, he sets out to understand the processes by which all the complex infrastructure of a Catholic

⁶⁵Ibid., 266–67.

nation accommodated itself to Protestantism. By what journeys did individual men and women come to accept reformed teachings and spiritual practices? How did University Colleges, city livery companies, town governments, and Inns of Court readjust their liturgical life and calendar, their social celebrations and economic arrangements, their iconography and their rhetoric, to the new religion? How was the vacuum left by Catholic institutions — such as monasteries and chantries — filled, and how were the resources, responsibilities, and powers of these institutions redistributed?

Jones's book thus attempts an overview of the process of cultural adaptation that takes us to the heart of the Tudor experience of religious revolution. Attempts to elucidate the pace and extent of these cultural transformations by attention to particular aspects have produced some of the best recent writing on early modern English religion, taking us away from straight narrative to confront broader questions of social and psychic continuity and disjunction under the dynastic and ideological shifts.⁶⁶

Much of this work is focused on the later Tudor and Stuart periods, and I want to end by registering the extent to which our understanding of religion in the reigns of Elizabeth and the first Stuarts has been revolutionized in recent years, in large part due to the work of Pat Collinson and his pupils, followers, and academic interlocutors. Collinson has been responsible for a work of revision every bit as momentous as the revisionism I have been describing in this paper. A generation ago, Puritanism was perceived as a Taliban-like, deviant, and ultimately breakaway extremist minority movement, marginal to the mainstream *via media* of the Elizabethan Settlement. Christopher Haigh, I think, might still maintain there was mileage in that account, but thanks to Collinson and his pupils, most of us now view “the Godly” (we hesitate to call them Puritans) as a minority certainly, but a far from marginal minority, the advance-guard of mainstream Protestantism, in pursuit of the social transformation of the godly nation. The Elizabethan Settlement itself is seen as anything but settled, but rather the shifting background to a complex struggle for the soul of the nation slugged out, community by community, throughout late Tudor England, within court and privy council, in conflict over the control of town governments, the appointment of town preachers, the administration and personnel of colleges, the promotion of cathedral or diocesan dignitaries, the enforcement or non-enforcement of conformity, the observance of Sabbaths and fasts, the licensing of alehouses, and the suppression of games. Thanks to Collinson, Elizabethan England looks both more and

⁶⁶See, for example, Watts on popular ballads and chapbooks; Walsham on belief in providence and the supernatural; and Marshall on beliefs about death and the afterlife.

less Protestant than it once did, its bishops and Protestant theologians self-consciously anti-Catholic participants in the world of international Calvinism, but its religious convictions more contested and precarious than we were once aware. In a Collinsonian world, the religious instability and division in towns like Stratford-on-Avon in the 1560s and 1570s is more readily understood, and the recent fireworks in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *London Review of Books* over Steven Greenblatt's recent biography of Shakespeare produced the delicious irony that it was Pat Collinson, Britain's leading historian of Protestantism, who intervened to insist that Alistair Fowler and Colin Burrow had dismissed too lightly the evidence for the Catholic conversion or reconversion of John Shakespeare in 1580.⁶⁷ Now there's revisionism.

MAGDALENE COLLEGE

⁶⁷Burrow. Fowler's review of Greenblatt appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* no. 5314 (4 February 2005), 3–5, and Collinson's letter in *TLS* no. 5315 (11 February 2005), 17.

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