

Confessional Identity in Early Stuart England: The “Prayer Book Puritanism” of Elizabeth Isham

Isaac Stephens

Let me leave upon Record to the shame of England; That all this is not meerly through idleness, because they will not be at the pains to serve God, but it is out of a bitter enmity to his Word and wayes; for they will be at more pains then this in any way that is evil, or in any worship of mans devising: They are as zealous for Crosses, and Surplices, Processions and Perambulations, reading of a Gospel at a cross way, the observation of Holidays, and Fasting days, the repeating of the Letany, or the like forms in the Common Prayer [Book].¹

In his pointed critique, Richard Baxter presaged conventional historical wisdom—Puritans were intensely hostile to the Book of Common Prayer. Of course, there is considerable evidence to warrant such a conclusion. Two early fathers of the Puritan community, John Field and Thomas Wilcox, proved uncomplimentary in 1572: “We must nedes say as foloweth, that this [Prayer] boke is an unperfect boke, culled and picked out of that popishe dunghil, the . . . Masse boke ful of all abhominations.”² Three decades later, a number of

Isaac Stephens is visiting assistant professor of history at Dalhousie University. Thanks go to Peter Lake, Ken Fincham, Tom Cogswell, and the anonymous reviewers for reading drafts of this article. Isaac Stephens presented previous versions at the Institute of Historical Research and at the Renaissance Society of America’s annual conference held in Los Angeles in 2009; the comments at both have strengthened the final product. All quotes from Elizabeth Isham’s “Book of Remembrance” are made with permission from the manuscript division of Princeton University Library.

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest: or a Treatise of the Blessed State of the Saints in Their Enjoyment of God in Glory* (London, 1650), 344r–344v.

² John Field and Thomas Wilcox, *An Admonition to the Parliament* (Hemel Hempstead, 1572), A8v. See also W. H. Frere and C. E. Douglas, eds., *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of The Puritan Revolt, with a Reprint of the Admonition to the Parliament and Kindred Documents, 1572* (New York, 1907), 21.

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ministers from the diocese of Lincoln echoed Field's and Wilcox's sentiments: "It is contrary to God's Word to use . . . such ceremonies [from the Prayer Book] in the worship of God as man hath devised if they be notoriously known to have been of old and still be abused unto idolatry and superstition by the papists."³ Equally critical, Sabine Staesmore, a separatist living in Amsterdam, wrote in 1619: "By our public communion with this book, we act real subjection to an Anti-christian hierarchy, which enjoin it upon her servants; imitating herein the mother Rome upon her vassals."⁴ Outcries against the Prayer Book only intensified as the Civil War drew near. In 1641, a publication appeared in which Richard Bernard urged Parliament to abolish the book: "wee againe and againe entreat you to pluck up that plant of the service-booke, which God neuer set."⁵ Based on such sources, it is easy to argue for a continuous strain of Puritan opposition to the Book of Common Prayer that stretched from the 1560s to the 1640s. Indeed, with Parliament's adoption of the *Directory of Public Worship*, we could conclude that this opposition reached a crescendo in 1645.

The *Directory*, however, proved both unpopular and a short-lived replacement, as clandestine and open use of the Prayer Book continued up to the Restoration. John Morrill has argued that such behavior stemmed from a popular commitment to the old liturgy of the Church of England, a commitment that undermined Puritan efforts for further religious reformation during and after the Civil War.⁶ A number of scholars have examined the emergence and manifestation of this Prayer Book zeal. Highlighting the social and spiritual drama that birth, marriage, and death produced, David Cressy has shown how the Book of Common Prayer graced these stages in the life cycle with ceremony. The Prayer Book sat at the heart of everyday existence, assisting people in ritually defining the baptism of children, the churching of women, the marriage of couples, and the burial of the dead.⁷ Revisionist historians of the Reformation have focused on this attachment to ritual when postulating the entrenched position that Catholicism had in Tudor England. Eamon Duffy and Christopher Haigh have depicted the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer as a morphing of Catholic ritual, something that they have claimed made the Reformation easier to stomach for the majority of sixteenth-century people who were conservative and devoted to the traditions of the Roman Church.⁸

This interpretation paints a picture of continuity in which the Prayer Book

³ Church of England, Diocese of Lincoln, *An Abridgment of that Booke which the Ministers of Lincoln Diocess Delivered to his Majestie Upon the First of December Last* (England, 1605), 17.

⁴ Sabine Staesmore, *The Unlawfulness of Reading in Prayer* (Amsterdam, 1619), 38.

⁵ Dwalphintramis [pseud.], *The Anatomie of the Service Book, Dedicated to the High Court of Parliament* (ca. 1641), 66. Richard Bernard, a noted religious writer and nonconforming Jacobean minister, used Dwalphintramis as a pseudonym. The book was likely published shortly after Bernard died in March 1641.

⁶ John Morrill, "The Church in England, 1642–9," in *Reactions to the English Civil War, 1642–1649*, ed. John Morrill (New York, 1982), 103–14.

⁷ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997).

⁸ See esp. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992), 588–91; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993), 288–91, and *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1975), 306–7.

appears more as a sign of Catholicism's survival than as a product of the Reformation. As Diarmaid MacCulloch has pointed out, the interpretation is untenable.⁹ After all, there were many aspects of the Book of Common Prayer that were clear breaks with the Catholic past, particularly a liturgy in English that repudiated the mass, the cult of the saints, and any notion of a sacerdotal priesthood. Judith Maltby has also emphasized the extent to which the Prayer Book was a decidedly Protestant document, arguing that it was perhaps the most pervasive agent of change in the period after 1559. Backed by Parliamentary law and the protection of Elizabeth I's long reign, the Prayer Book fundamentally shaped the religious sensibilities of the English laity. Over time, many people acquired a deep affection for the new service book. Indeed, confronted by Puritan nonconformity, these people commonly defended their beloved liturgy by bringing such deviants before the church courts during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Moreover, on the eve of the Civil War, they proved hostile to a godly reformation, presenting Parliament with nearly thirty county petitions in support of the Prayer Book and episcopacy between 1640 and 1642. On the basis of such evidence, Maltby has argued for the existence of a coherent religious identity that spanned the period from the Elizabethan settlement to the Civil War, an identity for which she has coined the term, "Prayer Book Protestantism." Maltby has defined this identity as a medium between two extremes. Moderate in nature, her "Prayer Book Protestants" neither supported the Laudian reforms nor agreed with further calls for reformation by the godly.¹⁰

While a stimulating concept, her vision of the religious environment of Elizabethan and Jacobean England is somewhat oversimplified. This is especially striking with relation to Puritanism, a term and concept with a complex history that does not easily lend itself to such simplification. As a concept, Puritanism, at its most basic level, describes a particularly intense form of English Protestantism that largely centered on a strict observance of Calvinist theology, on an exaltation of Scripture and the Word preached, on antipopery, and on an often austere style of piety and way of life. The term "Puritan" itself originated sometime in the 1560s, intended at first as an insult for clergy who refused to conform to the dictates of the Elizabethan religious settlement. By the end of the sixteenth century it had developed into a polemical catchphrase applied to people who commonly referred to themselves as the godly or God's saints. Contemporary critics found that these people's zealous and pious nature predisposed them to find iniquity and vice everywhere in English society and to be critical of most of, if not all, the liturgical traditions and administrative structures of the national church. Furthermore, the attitudes of Puritans led them to openly question and to be hostile to the authority of the crown and state, making them political radicals and threats to social hierarchy and order. Such an image has greatly defined the godly since their emergence in

⁹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation," *Journal of British Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1991): 1–19, and "Putting the English Reformation on the Map," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 15 (2005): 75–95. For the innovative aspects of the Prayer Book, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven, CT, 1996), 410–21, 504–12, and 620–28.

¹⁰ For her arguments, see primarily Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1998), particularly the introduction and conclusion, and "'By This Book': Parishioners, the Prayer Book, and the Established Church," in *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642*, ed. Kenneth Fincham (Basingstoke, 1993), 115–37.

the sixteenth century and has long carried enormous and enduring scholarly weight, especially influencing “Whig” interpretations of the early modern period. Maltby has generally accepted the Whig perspective that Puritanism was opposed to both the state and the national church, viewing it as a religion defined by nonconformists and separatists or the root and branch zealots of the early 1640s who called for the abolition of episcopacy.¹¹ Moreover, while attempting to distance herself from such historians as Haigh, Maltby has nonetheless assumed that the godly found no merits in the Book of Common Prayer. Both scholars have effectively accepted that the views of men like Field, Wilcox, and Bernard on the Prayer Book typified all Puritans.¹²

Although it is true that the godly did produce radical opposition that many in the period interpreted as treacherous, schismatic, or rebellious, they nonetheless could also be a compromising group. Patrick Collinson and Peter Lake have shown that Puritanism was far more complex than the conventional Whig view has acknowledged. Rather than defining Puritanism in terms of its opposition to governing structures and liturgical forms, both have stressed that it was more a style of piety, attitudes, and doctrines designed to fit within and animate the religious life of the national church. Consequently, the relationship of Puritanism to the church was anything but straightforwardly adversarial. Godly clerics could and did prove moderate in their stance on the church’s established liturgy and episcopal structure—they often desired further religious reform but sought it through existing and accepted ecclesiastical means. The compromise paid dividends, for godly attitudes and beliefs on such doctrines and practices as Calvinism and preaching came to define much of the character of the church in the early Stuart period.¹³ In relation to the Book of Common Prayer, Collinson has argued that Puritan divines, as early as the 1560s, began observing selective elements of the service book, rather than completely rejecting it. As he has noted, it was “the kind of pragmatic compromise which was so characteristic of Elizabethan puritanism.”¹⁴ Such pragmatism continued in the seventeenth century, as many godly ministers willingly used the Prayer Book, albeit in a reformed manner.

On Puritanism of this sort, Maltby’s work is largely silent. There is no such thing as a moderate Puritan in her interpretative framework, a fact that may be

¹¹ For representative examples of Whig views on Puritanism, see S. R. Gardiner, *The History of England from the Accession of James I to the Outbreak of the Civil War*, 10 vols. (London, 1883); Christopher Hill, *The Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1965); Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (London, 1966). On the historiography of Puritanism and the history of the term, useful works include John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, ed. John Coffey and Paul C.H. Lim (Cambridge, 2008), 1–15; Patrick Collinson, *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London, 1983), esp. chap. 1; Peter Lake, “The Historiography of Puritanism,” in Coffey and Lim, *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, 346–71.

¹² Eamon Duffy has a nuanced take on Puritanism, viewing it as a far more compromising religion than do Haigh and Maltby. For examples, see Eamon Duffy, “The Reformed Pastor in English Puritanism,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 83, no. 1 (2003): 216–34, and “The Godly and the Multitude in Early Stuart England,” *The Seventeenth Century* 1, no. 1 (1986): 31–55.

¹³ See particularly Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London, 1967), and *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982); Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge, 1982). See also Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590–1640* (Oxford, 1987).

¹⁴ Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 364.

due to her interest in lay piety. Sources that reveal the religious beliefs of the early modern laity are notoriously in slim supply, especially for the mass of people who lacked the ability to read and write. Of course, Maltby has attempted to overcome this reality with her use of church court records and Parliamentary petitions. She has accepted that each set of evidence reveals both popular attachment to the Book of Common Prayer and lay resentment of Puritans. After all, court presentments usually centered on godly ministers who allegedly failed to adhere to the established liturgy, and petitions called for protection of the Prayer Book from Parliamentarians hell-bent on its abolition. Based on such evidence, it is understandable then why Maltby has essentially ignored the existence of moderate Puritans, since her sources appear to depict the godly as an uncompromising group. Yet we must take caution against viewing such sources at face value. As Martin Ingram and John Fielding have both pointed out, difficulties exist when using court records to uncover the religious attitudes of the laity, just as others have argued that the petitioning campaigns of the early 1640s may not have represented a transparent reflection of popular religious sentiment.¹⁵ Moreover, reliance on court records and petitions reveals little or nothing about the private and introspective spiritual practices of the early modern English.

We must remember that although communal religious life that revolved around the parish church was significant to the spiritual life of an individual, it was not necessarily always the driving force that defined a layperson's personal piety and devotional practices. Equally important was the pietist turn in English Protestantism that first emerged in the late Elizabethan period and came to fruition during the early seventeenth century. As an extension of their attempts to promote further religious reform from within the national church, moderate Puritans shifted much of their focus to shaping the internal piety of the laity. Leading the charge in this endeavor were men like Richard Rogers, William Perkins, and Richard Greenham who pioneered, both in the pulpit and in devotional literature, a private approach to the cultivation of practical divinity. Calvinist in its theological orientation, this approach attracted many other divines, who in turn extolled its virtues in both sermons and guidebooks that became immensely popular. The outcome was the creation of an introspective piety of self-examination or experimental predestinarianism that a number of scholars have argued became widespread by the 1630s.¹⁶ Thus, not only did Calvinism come to define the doctrine of the national church, but a form of Calvinist pietism sank deep roots among the laity. Therefore, if, as Maltby contends, the vast majority of the laity had genuine affection for the Book of Common Prayer, then it is surely likely that many also

¹⁵ Martin Ingram, "Puritans and the Church Courts, 1560–1640," in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (New York, 1996), 76–79; John Fielding, "Conformists, Puritans and the Church Courts: The Diocese of Peterborough, 1603–1642" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1989), chaps. 2–3; John Walter, "Confessional Politics in Pre-Civil War Essex: Prayer Books, Profanations, and Petitions," *Historical Journal* 44, no. 3 (September 2001): 677–701.

¹⁶ The literature on the pietist turn and internal Puritan piety is quite vast. For useful examples, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), esp. pt. 2; John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford, 1991), pt. 1; Charles Lloyd Cohen, *God's Caress: The Psychology of Puritan Religious Experience* (Oxford, 1986), particularly chap. 3; Lake, *Moderate Puritans*, chap. 7.

brought a Calvinist, if not Puritan, sensibility to their affection for and use of the service book.

An attempt, however, to uncover such internal piety faces challenges. To understand the interiority of lay religion requires sources that provide insight into the mental frameworks that shaped early modern people's style of piety. The best sources for this endeavor are diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies, since the authors of these sorts of life-writings fell directly under the influence of the very introspective piety that Rogers, Perkins, and Greenham extolled. Yet only a relatively small cache of these writings have survived from the period, especially those by women. Fortunately, a remarkable 60,000-word spiritual autobiography has emerged that allows for a thorough examination of an early modern layperson's piety from the inside as it were.¹⁷ Entitled "My Book of Remembrance" and completed in 1639, the autobiography was the work of Elizabeth Isham, a gentlewoman from Northamptonshire. Primarily a written confession to God that covers the first thirty years of her life, Elizabeth's "Book of Remembrance" reveals much about her personal piety. We learn that she revered the Prayer Book and found the ceremonies and set prayers associated with it essential elements in her religious practices. On the surface, this would appear to make Elizabeth one of Maltby's "Prayer Book Protestants," and as such an opponent to Puritan forms of religion. Yet this was not the case. Indeed, Elizabeth associated with radical-Puritan clerics, had an affinity for the godly community, and practiced an intense form of internal piety common among Puritans. In short, her religion was a fusion of Prayer Book worship and godly devotion. Consequently, the case of Elizabeth Isham raises the possibility that both godly piety and a dedication to the Prayer Book could work hand-in-hand in shaping the religious beliefs and confessional identity of an early modern layperson.

PRAYER BOOK WORSHIP AND CONFORMITY

Elizabeth Isham was the daughter of Sir John Isham and Judith, Lady Isham of Lamport Hall. Born in 1609, Elizabeth never married, living at the Isham estate until her death at the age of forty-five in 1654. She was the eldest of the Isham children, who included her brother, Justinian, and sister, Judith. All three children had a strong emotional attachment to their mother, who took a great interest in teaching them to read and providing them with their earliest religious education. Elizabeth often noted in her "Book of Remembrance" that her mother actively engaged her children with devotional literature. Recalling when she was around

¹⁷ Elizabeth Isham, "My Booke of Rememenberance [*sic*]," ca. 1639, RTCO1 (no. 62), The Robert Taylor Collection, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Hereafter, all folios of the manuscript will be cited parenthetically in the text; also note that I have modernized the spelling of the title of the autobiography to "My Book of Remembrance." For discussion of the autobiography in its many contexts, see Isaac Stephens, "Under the Shadow of the Patriarch: Elizabeth Isham and Her World in Seventeenth-Century Northamptonshire" (PhD diss., University of California, Riverside, 2008), and "The Courtship and Singlehood of Elizabeth Isham, 1630–1634," *Historical Journal* 51, no. 1 (March 2008): 1–25, and "My Cheefest Work": The Making of the Spiritual Autobiography of Elizabeth Isham," *Midland History* 34, no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 181–203. See also the Web site, "Constructing Elizabeth Isham," <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/projects/isham/>.

seven, Elizabeth wrote: “my mother gaue me & my sister a prayer booke a piece and I was much stirred betimes to this spiritual exercise of prayer by reading” (fol. 8r). The book was *A Godly Garden*, an anonymously authored manual and collection of set prayers first published in 1574.¹⁸ In addition, Elizabeth had early exposure to the Prayer Book catechism, the early study of which soon allowed her to recite most of it by heart: “I could say most of that in the seruis[e] booke by hearing her [an Isham servant] that tended us.” To further her daughter’s religious learning, Lady Isham supplemented the Prayer Book by providing Elizabeth with another catechism “with pruftes [proofs]” that she “liked well to redd.” The text was by the godly Eusebius Pagit, an Elizabethan and Jacobean cleric related to the Ishams. Differing with Lady Isham, Sir John preferred another method for catechizing the children: “my father would haue us learn that [the catechism] without proufts, I suppose because it was easier for memorey, for which I thought it hard enough.” Indeed, he proved eager to test his children’s knowledge: “At last I hauing learnt it my father hard me say it and my brother and sister every Sabbath, when our turns came, in the after noone; I remember the pains I took saying it euery night to my selfe, for fear lest I should forget it” (fol. 10v).¹⁹

Despite the fact of her apparent exposure to a godly catechism, all of this early education seems to have led Elizabeth to have a personal devotion to the Book of Common Prayer. As a child, she used the service book as a means to please God: “out of feare or love, being ze[a]lous to doe well, I affton repeted my prayers at a time together with the ten commandments & [with] belliefe, saying the old caticisme in the seruis[e] booke” (fol. 4r). Elizabeth also learned the importance of prayer from Lady Isham: “I remember my mother once wisht mee to use to say my praiers in the after noon, besides morning and euening, the which pious exercise, as I take it, she said her mother used.” She took her mother’s advice to heart, writing that she often prayed two to three times a day as an adult, reciting prayers from the Book of Common Prayer in the process: “through thy grace [God] I haue continued [my mother’s practice], haueing no let to the contrary, saying 2 or 3 prayers [a day] which are in the seruis booke” (fol. 8r). Not only did she actively apply the Prayer Book in her daily prayers, but she also seems to have internalized its very language, for she sometimes directly incorporated this language into written prayers in her “Book of Remembrance.” This is especially striking near the end of the autobiography in which Elizabeth quoted and paraphrased portions of the general confession found in the Prayer Book’s prescribed service for holy communion: “Now Lord for thy Christ and our Jesus forgie all that is past, saue and defende me from euill and conferme me in a godly life to the honour and glory of thy Name, Amen” (fol. 37v).²⁰ The fact that as an adult she consulted the Book of Common Prayer as a source for her daily prayers, combined with her application of its language in her autobiography, suggests that she had a reverence for the text.

Such reverence motivated Elizabeth to use the Prayer Book when serving as a

¹⁸ Anon., *A Godly Garden Out of the Which Most Comfortable Herbs Maybe Gathered For the Health of the Wounded Conscience of All Penitent Sinners* (London, 1574).

¹⁹ See also Eusebius Pagit, *Short Questions and Answers, Conteyning the Summe of Christian Religion* (London, 1579); Ian Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530–1740* (Oxford, 1996), 67, 210–11, 247, and 253.

²⁰ I thank the “Constructing Elizabeth Isham” project for bringing this to my attention.

religious pedagogue to the Isham servants at Lamport. In doing so, she followed in her mother's footsteps: "according to my mothers way I asked the maides what they could say my selfe helping them & also I heard them read euey one a chapter on the Sabbath dayes [and] of those which could not read I heard them say there Catechisme." Elizabeth believed such instruction was essential, since she noted that "seruants shifted often into diuers parishes one minster learnt them one, and another, another [way], so that they could say letle or nothing when they came to a strange place of what was demanded, many of them failing in that which was most necessary to learn." The best way to alleviate the situation, so Elizabeth thought, was to utilize the Prayer Book catechism: "I found the old Catechisme to be the best for them . . . because I supposed it is fittest they should cheefely learne according to there vow in baptisme, the crede, the Lords prayer & the ten commandements." Such learning spiritually prepared the Isham servants "before they receiud the Blessed Sacrament" (fol. 25r) of holy communion. Her interest in whether the servants were fit to partake in communion was not surprising.

Of all the ceremonies prescribed in the Prayer Book, communion was perhaps the most revered and sacred element of the church's liturgy, and unsurprisingly the sacrament held a central place in Elizabeth's religious life: "for my spiritual growth that I may be confirmed strengthened & stablished in all vertuous & godly liuing thou hast reconciled and sealed me to thee euen by the Sacrament of thy precious Body and Blood" (fol. 20r). So worried was she over communion that she expressed concern over whether she was worthy of the sacrament toward the end of her "Book of Remembrance": "Now Lord for these yeeres in which I haue receiued the Blessed Sacrament of thy supper I haue not performed those good duties which thou requirest of me, hauing not that deuotion nor repentance nor reverence & zeale as I ought" (fol. 36v). Despite chastising herself, Elizabeth did not always feel that she was unworthy of the sacrament. Indeed, she remembered that when she was a teenager she was fit to receive communion after witnessing her mother instruct the Isham servants, instruction that often revolved around the Prayer Book catechism: "At this time I was the better fitted to receue [the sacrament] because I had diuers times hard my mother instruct her maids, which as I remember was to this efect, that as verily as they receued Bread & Wine so they should receiue Christ to be there Sauour with a stedfast faith that he died for us being sorry for our sinnes past, perposing to amend our liues & to be in loue & charity with all & this sacrament as a signe & seale that Christ died for us" (fol. 20r). The episode left an indelible mark on Elizabeth's later practice of preparing the Isham servants for communion, for which, like her mother, she used the service book. It was not the only example of Elizabeth placing importance in both the Prayer Book and the rituals of the church.

Throughout her life Elizabeth held affection for the feasts and holy days sanctioned by the Prayer Book, days that many Puritans believed were popish and bred sinful behavior. Elizabeth did not share such precise attitudes, as she clearly expressed when expounding on the importance of Christmas: "I call to mind the knowledge that I had in these times of our Lord and Sauour Jesus Christ which I well remember by the celebration of his feasts, & especially the feast of his natiuitie." She also found value in other religious holidays, especially the saints' days associated with the Apostles: "surely it is a good thing to reioyce in these Feasts and in the holydayes which are kept in memory of the Apostles, which

are the foundation of the church, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone in whom wee being members thereof groweth unto an holy Temple in the Lord.” For Elizabeth, knowledge of God came from observing holy days, and in turn allowed for the exaltation of his many mercies and benefits: “surely these feasts are the life of deuotion and doth stir up with the more cheerfulness, both unlettered people & children to the more Knowledge of God . . . these feasts or holydayes are kept in remembrance that God hath don thus & thus for them [his children]” (fol. 8v).

Elizabeth’s affection for holy feasts rounds out what appears to have been an entirely positive view of the liturgy and traditions of the national church. This should not surprise us, considering that she had learned the rhythms and virtues of the Prayer Book in her childhood, and in turn incorporated the service book in her daily prayers as an adult and used it for the religious instruction of the Isham servants. The environment of Lampport only reinforced Elizabeth’s attitudes toward the Book of Common Prayer, for there was a well-established tradition of conformity in the parish largely because of the type of ministers appointed by her father to serve the cure. Sir John held the advowson in the parish and a ninety-nine-year lease of the rectory once he became the Isham patriarch in 1605. He inherited the conformist Daniel Baxter as rector, a man whom Sir John’s father, Thomas, had appointed in 1602. Sir John continued the tradition of choosing conformists throughout his life, to the chagrin of godly observers. Much of the irritation rested on the fact that the rectory was worth a goodly sum of £400 that Sir John largely pocketed for himself, causing an observer to comment in 1641: “no marvell if there were little preaching, and ’tis pittie that such a great living should be swallowed up under colour only of a Lease.”²¹ If there was indeed “little preaching,” then the church services at Lampport likely revolved mostly around the ceremonies of the Prayer Book. Of course, Elizabeth attended these services, which could only have reinforced the exposure to the Book of Common Prayer that she received in the Isham household.

She also had regular contact with the conformist ministers of the parish, who were often fixtures at Lampport Hall. Indeed, Daniel Baxter made numerous visits to the Isham home throughout most of Elizabeth’s formative years. As she remembered, the purpose of these visits usually pertained to the elder female members of the family, particularly her paternal grandmother (also named Elizabeth) and Lady Isham. Quite elderly during Elizabeth’s childhood, grandmother Isham appears to have been an invalid of sorts in her old age: “Master Baxter . . . used sometimes to expound to her by reason she was unable to goe to Church” (fol. 15v). These meetings created a close bond between the minister and Elizabeth’s grandmother, no better exemplified than by his reaction to her death in 1621: “our minister Mr Baxter, being very carfully with her, came to comfort my father and mother yet being ouer ruld with passion of affection he brake forth (as he came) . . . sayeing gon is that worthy woman she is gon she is gon” (fol. 17r). Although he likely did not have such an intimate relationship with Lady Isham, Baxter nonetheless also attended her in times of need.

Around the time that Elizabeth was ten, her mother began to suffer from bouts

²¹ Anon., *A Certificate from Northamptonshire* (London, 1641), 7. For Sir John’s religious beliefs and appointment of conformist ministers, see Stephens, “Under the Shadow,” chap. 1.

of melancholy and spiritual distress over doubts about her own salvation. Early on, the Ishams relied on grandmother Isham and Baxter to assist Lady Isham: “my mother growing more distressed had her friends to comfort her, as my grandmother who was brought to her and the minister of the Parish Mr. Baxter came often.” Elizabeth admired the way that Baxter prayed for the relief of her mother’s distress: “I well remember those effectuall prayers which he powred out for her, hauing a good gift in praying extemporary” (fol. 11r). She made similar statements of respect for Baxter’s qualities as a minister. Besides commonly experiencing episodes of spiritual anxiety, Lady Isham also suffered from constant physical illness. On one occasion in 1624, Sir John called on the services of the noted physician, Richard Napier, but Lady Isham proved hesitant to employ him without the assistance of her rector: “she feared he used indirect means, she therefore & my father desired Mr. Baxter . . . to goe to him for her that he might see by the lawfull waye of physicke she might have helpe.” Baxter dutifully complied with the request, going to meet Napier, from whom he received medicine and instructions that Elizabeth’s family should pray for Lady Isham’s recovery. The remedies subsequently worked, for Lady Isham’s condition improved. Thankful, Elizabeth remembered Baxter as a “minister who was ready to doe any good office” (fol. 18v). After Baxter’s tenure in Lamport ended in 1629, three other conformists to the national church—Thomas Bunning, William Nokes, and John Goodman—served in succession as rector in the parish during Elizabeth’s life. She appears to have also had a good relationship with all three ministers, going so far as to leave money upon her death to Goodman, who was among only five people to receive a bequest at her passing.²²

Considering all these connections to conformists, it is perhaps not surprising that the Ishams became Royalists. The most ardent was Elizabeth’s brother, Justinian, who resided in the king’s stronghold of Oxford, suffering sequestration and jail time in the 1650s for his pains.²³ The other Ishams also experienced hardship because of their political leanings during the war, as Elizabeth and her father fell victim to Parliamentary raids and looting at Lamport Hall. In addition, Roundheads often billeted at the Isham estate while the war raged.²⁴ Throughout all these episodes, Elizabeth remained loyal to the king. Indeed, she even drafted a letter addressed directly to Charles I, praying for prosperity and that he enjoy the devotion of his subjects.²⁵ Whether or not Elizabeth actually sent the letter is unknown, but plainly she, like her brother, was a staunch supporter of the crown and no friend to Parliament’s cause.

Elizabeth’s Royalism, combined with her reverence for the Book of Common Prayer and overall conformity to the Church of England, suggests that we could include her among Maltby’s “Prayer Book Protestants.” Yet none of this should lead to the conclusion that Elizabeth was anti-Puritan in her viewpoints. As many historians have rightly demonstrated, the structure of the Church of England in

²² Elizabeth Isham’s Will, 30 March 1654, Isham MSS, IL 320, Northamptonshire Record Office (hereafter NRO).

²³ See Stephens, “Under the Shadow,” chap. 2; Gyles Isham, ed., *The Correspondence of Bishop Brian Duppa and Sir Justinian Isham, 1650–1660* (Kettering, 1955), xxxiii–xliv.

²⁴ Elizabeth Isham’s so-called diary, Isham MSS, IL 3365, NRO; correspondence between Elizabeth Isham and Justinian Isham, Isham MSS, IC 3273 and IC 3274, NRO.

²⁵ Draft letter, Elizabeth Isham to Charles I, ca. 1645, Isham MSS, IC 4621, NRO.

the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries allowed for a wide range of religious beliefs. Although maintaining liturgical practices that many felt resembled Roman traditions, the English Church was nonetheless an institution grounded in Calvinist theology. By 1640, this church structure had created a confessional spectrum buttressed on one end by English Arminians, or anti-Calvinists, and on the other by radical Puritans.²⁶ Such a diverse religious environment allowed the possibility for individuals to combine a range of religious opinions and styles of piety into a variety of different syntheses. In other words, there were many different ways to be a conformist member of the national church. Elizabeth Isham provides us with an example of just such a synthesis, for while she may appear on the surface to personify “Prayer Book Protestantism,” her piety was nonetheless also centered on an introspective style of Calvinist devotion more often attributed to Puritans than to Maltby’s devotees of the Prayer Book.

SIN AND THE DEVIL

Written over an approximately one-year period between 1638 and 1639, Elizabeth’s “Book of Remembrance” was a retrospective text on her life, produced under a number of interrelated influences and motivations. While writing the autobiography, family tragedy hit the Ishams when Justinian’s first wife, Jane, died soon after giving birth to a short-lived infant boy in the late winter of 1639, leaving behind four young daughters for her husband to raise. Seeing herself as a surrogate mother to the girls, Elizabeth subsequently decided to bequeath her “Book of Remembrance” to them for their religious education. Lady Isham provided the precedent to do so, since she had produced spiritual writings that served as an inspiration for Elizabeth to put her own spiritual reflections in writing. Based on Elizabeth’s descriptions, Lady Isham’s writings seem to have been notebooks in which, as was common for many godly laypersons, she recorded her daily spiritual exercises and experiences.²⁷ Yet, despite their influence, these notebooks only provided Elizabeth with a rudimentary model of what internal Puritanism might look like in action. An equally significant influence on her “Book of Remembrance” came from the devotional literature of the period. Elizabeth’s own personal library was predominantly Puritan and revolved around the pietist tradition established in England, including texts by divines such as Richard Rogers, Richard Greenham, William Perkins, John Preston, Richard Sibbs, Daniel Dyke, and John Dod.²⁸ Three

²⁶ For useful discussion, see Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists*; David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Stanford, CA, 2004); Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker’s Revenge: ‘Orthodoxy’, ‘Heterodoxy’, and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester, 2001); Collinson, *Religion of Protestants*.

²⁷ Unfortunately, Lady Isham’s spiritual writings are now lost. For discussion of spiritual life-writing, see Owen Watkins, *The Puritan Experience: Studies in Spiritual Autobiography* (New York, 1972), chaps. 1–2; D. B. Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), chap. 1; Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791* (Stanford, CA, 1996), chap. 4.

²⁸ See primarily lists of Elizabeth’s books, Isham MSS, IC 4829 and IC 4825, NRO. For discussion of her reading, see Stephens, “Under the Shadow,” chaps. 3 and 6. She owned books from a number of genres, but her reading was predominantly devotional, and nearly all of the religious books that she owned and read were by English clerics. In short, her reading appears to have been predominantly Anglo-centric.

clerics, however, had the most direct influence on Elizabeth's "Book of Remembrance"—Henry Mason, John King, and Augustine of Hippo. Texts by these three clerics inspired her to engage in rigorous spiritual self-examination, but it was Augustine's *Confessions* that served as Elizabeth's chief literary model when composing a life narrative that was a testament of her intense introspective piety.

Concern over death served as the initial and major motivation for the autobiography's production.²⁹ These concerns began a year after Elizabeth's sister, Judith, died in 1636. The bond between the women was extremely strong, and on the one-year anniversary of Judith's death, Elizabeth noted that she wished to join her sister in heaven, a wish that brought guilt: "And now Lord thou correctedst me . . . I blamed my selfe considering that death should not be desired out of naturall affection or human respect but to be with thee" (fol. 33r). As time progressed into the next year, Elizabeth's thoughts of her own demise continued. To ready herself for death, she believed that she needed to examine her life: "I then thought of my owne death and that it was most necessary to looke to my owne waies, calling . . . to mind let a man try & examine himselfe" (fol. 33v). To aid such self-examination, Elizabeth put pen to paper and remembered her transgressions, confessed her sins, and acknowledged the active role that she believed God played in her existence.

At the center of Elizabeth's life narrative was a self-perceived struggle against temptation and sin. An exercise in the creation and deployment of memory, her "Book of Remembrance" enabled her to recall, recast, and recount her life as a story of the interrelations between a just and merciful God and one of his elect saints. In this respect she began her account deep within her own childhood, dwelling on sins that she committed in her youth. Chief among these were certain acts of theft. Thus, she recalled an incident that occurred at the age of eight or nine: "hauing fancied a primer [I] put it in a place where it co[u]ld not be found . . . but it was asked for and I denied hauing of it, thinking to auoid both the shame & punishment (but which was worse, I was not ashamed before thee [God] whom I ought most to feare)" (fol. 4r). Despite her shame, Elizabeth went on to steal again, this time taking fruit: "a lickorishnesse stole upon me to open my mothers coberd . . . I longed to trie whether I could open it with my key, which when I had found the way of it, I took fruit from thence." As with the primer, Elizabeth denied her offense: "my mother hauing charged me with it, I flatly denied it & so scaped both the shame of the fact & her anger." Yet, for Elizabeth, the theft was not her only nor even her greatest transgression, since desire for the fruit derived from gluttony, a sin she recalled as all too typical of her childhood self. On her own account, Elizabeth had not been eager to share with others: "my mother let me keepe a closet to my selfe, wherein I kept pares to dish out for the table, my father inioining me that I should eat no pares, but they tempting me euery time I saw them, I should take one, hauing som regard to my fathers command; thinking that if I offended not in the number, I did well enough." Not only had she been gluttonous, but she had been deceptive and disobedient. Offering final comment on these youthful transgressions, Elizabeth wrote: "my conscience hath often reproved me for these & other [such] things" (fol. 10r).

She also found fault with her devotional practices. Remembering when she was

²⁹ For why Elizabeth wrote her "Book of Remembrance," see Stephens, "My Cheefest Work."

around twelve years old, Elizabeth recounted: “I haue bin animated to doe thee [God] seruice as for the good example I had of others & for the knowledge that thou gauest me of thy power whereby I feared thee for as thou art a father . . . so art thou also a Lord & a reuenger to punish them which will not obey.” Such fear made Elizabeth more dutiful in her service to God, but also caused her to severely judge her childhood self: “at these times to often I confesse I serued rather out of feare of punishment to my selfe . . . which was a seruell kind of feare & not so much for thine own sake . . . & serue thee for loue as I ought to haue done.” Looking back on her childhood piety, Elizabeth used it as a means to reflect on her more mature devotion to God as a grown woman. Yet she nevertheless admitted there was still room for improvement: “Although thou [God] hast increased stren[g]th in my soule [since being a child], yet I deplore my owne weaknes of faith & loue towards thee” (fol. 16v). Besides bemoaning the weakness of her faith, Elizabeth reproached herself for sins committed in her later life. Indeed, she confessed that she was often too self-centered and thought too highly of herself at the age of twenty-eight: “the most that possest me was vaine thoughts or vaine things & selfe conceit . . . I found them the worse because they many times interrupted me in good duties” (fol. 32r). Elizabeth continued to have what she considered to be sinful thoughts over the next few years, culminating in her confession: “now impure thoughts haue troubled me to apply thy most holy Name to filthy things besides to scoffe at thee & thy Name.” Besides scoffing at God and having impure thoughts, she also at times doubted the concept of the Holy Trinity: “I haue bine tented to the disuniting of the Blessed Trinity (or not to esteeme one person [God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit] so well as another)” (fol. 35r).

Elizabeth recognized that these temptations and sins originated from her own self, but like many Puritans, she often interpreted her struggles against temptation as a literal battle with Satan.³⁰ He was a being whom she envisaged preyed on the godly in times of their spiritual weakness: “Our aduersary the deuill is not ignorant of his fittest oppertunity, but is alwayes wachfull to ouerthrow us when wee are at the weakest” (fol. 10v). Typically, she located the earliest of her experiences with the devil in her childhood, as was the case when she recalled overhearing, at the age of ten, Lady Isham reading scripture: “I hearing some descorses of that place of Scripture, wherein Jobs wife temted him, saying curse God & die; this word so ran in my mind, the Deuill darting it into mee . . . diuers times before I could at the present resist him of calling upon thee my God that I thought I had through my negligence by my to much yeelding, committed that foule sin of blaspheme against the holy Ghost, which should neuer be forgiuen, thus the deuill would haue driuen me to despare” (fol. 13r). Here was the devil tempting Elizabeth to curse God and then using that initial temptation to entice her further with despair for having committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. When she was a grown woman, Elizabeth found that she was more ready to combat such diabolical temptations. Remembering reaching the age of twenty-four, she recalled:

³⁰ Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2006); Darren Oldridge, *The Devil in Early Modern England* (Stroud, 2000), chap. 3; Frank Luttmer, “Persecutors, Tempters and Vassals of the Devil: The Unregenerate in Puritan Practical Divinity,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 51, no. 1 (January 2000): 37–68.

“as I take it by this time I had learned to reply more swiftly to those asalts of Satan using those words of our Sauior, auoide Satan . . . & not to pause or parlye with him, this way I found to be most safe & my enemie soonest quell[ed]” (fol. 26v). Despite her breakthrough, the moment did not mark the end of the torment that she experienced at the devil’s hands. On one occasion, Satan invaded her thoughts when she partook in one of her favorite pastimes, cloth work: “when I was about my worke I could perceiue when Satan began to tempt me which I thought first was a kinde of numnes in my soule or sences.” Once again, Elizabeth found the devil ready to lure her to despair: “Then a temtation which if I through my own slothfulnes did not resist quickly, I thought I yeluded then (many times) he [Satan] would tempte me with desperation.” Unable to defend herself, she often sang Psalms in response (fol. 26r). Facing despair, Elizabeth thus turned to God for his helping hand. In doing so, she engaged in prayer, an act that she believed would allow her to be a recipient of his mercy.

PRAYER AND GOD’S MERCY

In an effort to buttress her belief that she was one of God’s elect, Elizabeth admitted, throughout her “Book of Remembrance,” her own spiritual inadequacy and corruption. The medium through which she sought to express such feelings was prayer. Considering herself a fallen creature, Elizabeth believed that only God’s forgiveness could cleanse her of her sinfulness. Rejecting human works as a way to acquire divine mercy or salvation, she sought confirmation of her own elect status by recognizing her sinfulness and spiritual impotence in the face of God’s justice. For Elizabeth, prayer was the ultimate means through which to confess her sins and to admit her complete reliance on the healing effects of God’s grace for salvation.³¹

She had recognized the importance of prayer as a young girl and initially appears to have sought escape from such things as parental punishment for trivial offenses by calling on God’s assistance: “I wel remember my praying unto thee to a voyde my mothers displeasure, euen for my needle when I had lost it” (fols. 3v–4r). From the perspective of her adult self, Elizabeth found much to criticize about such youthful prayers: “I haue considered of my praying when I was a yong child unto thee and thought it better not to haue done it.” This regret stemmed from her sense that as a child she had not prayed with enough knowledge and reverence: “I uttered a vocall kind of seruis[e] talking like a parrit rather of custom then deuotion, and littel better after more of deuotion then of knowledge, speaking words too wonderful for mee” (fol. 6v). While all this served as a condemnation of a certain sort of rote learning, and the mindless repetition of set prayer, it did not lead Elizabeth entirely to condemn her childhood efforts: “yet upon consideration I thinke better of this early seruing of thee my God, perceiuing the inclination of children to be apt to learne that which is not so good and to reioyce in it” (fols. 6v–7r). Thus, Elizabeth was grateful that she had learned to ask for

³¹ For useful discussion of the importance of prayer for Puritans, see Johnstone, *Devil and Demonism*, 90–92; Paul Seaver, *Wallington’s World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA, 1985), 3–4, 39–41; Cynthia Garret, “The Rhetoric of Supplication: Prayer Theory in Seventeenth-Century England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 328–57.

God's mercy through the means of prayer, even though she did not always perform it as properly as she had wished. Having learned the value and importance of prayer, she did not fail to apply such learning when combating her various temptations and sins as an adult. This is clear toward the end of her "Book of Remembrance," for there Elizabeth poured forth numerous prayers to God for a litany of sins. In particular, she proved anxious over her frequent thoughts of "atheism" and mistrust in God: "Lord I humbly pray in mercy to pardon in me the sin of Athisme, infidillity, distrustfulnes, inconstancy in good scoffing at it my dullness & wekanes in not resisting the temtations of Satan." Moreover, Elizabeth pleaded for mercy for the grand cause of her infidelity: "Lord I humbly beseech thee to pardon wherein I haue broken any of thy commadement[s] . . . wherein I haue any waies offended in thought or word & deede against thy diuine Maiestie whether they be sinns of omission or of action." Bringing these prayers to a conclusion, Elizabeth begged: "O merciful God pardon these sinnes which I haue confessed to thee and many more which I am unable to resite" (fol. 37r).

By the time she wrote this plea, Elizabeth had come to view all her temptations and transgressions as an inevitable consequence of living in a fallen world. Yet she extracted hope from this belief, pointing to Hebrews 4:15 and reminding herself that even Christ suffered from temptations: "my onely refuge & comfort is we haue not an high pri[e]st [Christ] which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities but was in all things tempted in the like sort" (fol. 35r). Addressing this theme again in another section of her autobiography, Elizabeth cited Hebrews 2:18: "In that he [Christ] suffered and was temted, he is able to succour them that are temted." Although Christ ultimately had not succumbed to temptation, he had nonetheless experienced the most intense of temporal sufferings. This gave Elizabeth comfort; after all, if even Christ had suffered pain and misery, what could the godliest of his servants expect. If, however, they followed his example, and interpreted their own afflictions correctly, they could turn even the most dreadful suffering and soul threatening temptation to their spiritual benefit. Elizabeth subscribed to such belief: "God is faithfull, who will not suffer you to be temted aboute that you are able but will euen giue the issue with the temtation that ye may be able to bear it" (fol. 22v).

All of this suffering and sin brought the true believer closer to God. As Elizabeth wrote: "I remember my affliction[s] . . . my soule hath them in remembrance & is humbled in me I had the better experience of thy power & iustice whereby I feared thee and of thy mercy whereby my loue was increased to thee [and] my faith was strengthened in thee & both my selfe & others was bettered to serue thee" (fol. 25r). By acknowledging her sins and turning to God, Elizabeth felt she received his mercy, even though she admitted it sometimes proved a struggle: "thou seemest to hidest thy face from me to teach me to seeke that you maiest enlighten me with thy greater power & vertue" (fol. 35r). The struggle increased the desire to have God bestow his mercy; without spiritual pain there could be no spiritual gain. This notion typified Elizabeth's piety, something she openly expressed: "Now if thou [God] pardon, thy mercy shall appeare . . . for if we acknowledge our sinnes (with purpose to amend) thou art faithfull to forgiue them, to cleanse us from all unrighteousnesse" (fol. 36v). Here Elizabeth recognized not only the power of God, but also his love for his earthly children. As long as they identified their transgressions, he was more than willing to offer his

mercy and helping hand to raise them out of their sinfulness by means of his grace. In her “Book of Remembrance,” Elizabeth tried to recount her largely successful efforts to do exactly this, and thus to vindicate her status as a proper practitioner of true religion and an elect saint of God.

PROVIDENCE, PREDESTINATION, AND THE ELECT

Considering the patterns of Elizabeth’s prayers, it should come as no surprise that she had faith in God’s omnipotence, and consequently was acutely sensitive and aware of the role of his providence in her life and the world. So awed was she by the power of God that she ultimately submitted herself to his will: “in all earthly things I haue reposed my whole confidence in thy prouidence which knowest better what to giue then wee to aske” (fol. 8r). Yet surrendering her will could make Elizabeth anxious over whether she pleased God with her actions. This is illustrated by her experience with the possibility of wedlock. Although never marrying, Elizabeth came close in 1631 to wedding John Dryden of Canons Ashby, a fellow member of the Northamptonshire gentry and cousin to the poet. One cause for the dissolution of the match was a financial disagreement between the couple’s respective families. An equal, if not more important, reason for the failure was Elizabeth’s decision to defend Sir John’s honor by deciding to end the match so her father would not concede to the Drydens’ demands. It was a difficult choice for Elizabeth, since she had developed a deep affection for John Dryden, an affection that she believed led God to sour the match because she had come to love her suitor more than God himself. In other words, she interpreted the dissolution of the match as a sign that God ultimately wished that she never marry. Consequently, she forever turned her back on the prospect of marriage, despite her father’s wishes to the contrary, in order to avoid offending God again. This enabled her to regard her refusal to marry not as the disobedience of an undutiful daughter, determined to get her own way at the expense of her family, but rather as the obedient acceptance of divine providence.³²

While the most striking example of her belief in providence, her refusal to marry was not an isolated case of her faith in the power of God’s will. Recalling when she was twenty-four, only two years after the dissolution of the Isham-Dryden match, she noted: “Now many times I had a paine in my right thigh . . . so that I feared I should be lame.” Elizabeth’s religious sensibilities psychologically compounded her physical discomfort because she believed that the pain was the result of God’s judgment against her for insufficiently fighting against the devil’s temptations: “I thought Lord it was thy iust iudgment on me for yielding & not striuing so much as I should haue don against Satans temtations” (fol. 26v). Thus, not only did her fear of the devil lead her to despair, but she also found in him a ready cause of God’s providential punishment of her spiritual weakness to combat the

³² Stephens, “Courtship and Singlehood,” 1–25, and “Under the Shadow,” chap. 5. Another main function of her “Book of Remembrance” was to explain and defend her choice not to marry. I thank Anne Cotterill for an illuminating discussion of this matter with me. For her work on Elizabeth Isham, see her recent article, “Fit Words at the ‘Pitts Brinke’: The Achievement of Elizabeth Isham,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (June 2010): 225–48. See also Stephens, “My Cheefest Work,” 192–93.

prince of darkness. The fear of God's judgment, however, did not overshadow her overall conviction that his providence benefited her soul. She expressed this conviction toward the end of her autobiography: "Doutlesse there is a God that iudgeth in the earth. If I goe within the dores of my owne flesh I find thy [God's] prouidence wonderfull towards me that euen at the very same time of the pitts brinke of despare thou shouldest comfort" (fol. 32r). Trusting that divine providence would pull her away from the "pitts brinke" of anguish over her transgressions, Elizabeth trusted the will of God. Her belief in predestination preconditioned such trust.

Elizabeth had long been conversant in the doctrine of predestination, and clearly made a distinction between the reprobate and the elect. The origin of this awareness, like most things in her life, emerged during her childhood. She admitted in her "Book of Remembrance" that from a very early age she had a strong wish to be among God's chosen: "about this time hearing and understanding of the Blessedness of euerlasting life and of the unspeakable ioyes thereof . . . which thou Lord hast prepared for thine elect; aboue all things I desired it" (fol. 8r). When in her late twenties Elizabeth came to obsess about the prospect of her own death, the "unspeakable joys" of heaven naturally flooded her thoughts: "I was angry with my selfe that I should be so loth to goe to thee [God], considering thy Blessed saints haue desired to be desolued & to be with thee I found if I was prepared I should be willing with ioy to render me selfe into thy hands" (fol. 33r). Crucial to such preparation was a natural inclination and desire to repent for one's transgressions and sins. She explicitly articulated her belief in this notion when recalling how the spiritual trials she experienced during her courtship with John Dryden had led to self-doubt about her salvation: "for a space of time [I] felt no difference betwext my selfe and a reprobate." She overcame such doubt by assuring herself that the elect repent for their transgressions while the reprobate do not: "for there is not that custome that bindeth ingratitude and locketh impenitency . . . in the Godly as in the wicked" (fol. 22v).³³

It is little wonder then that Elizabeth labored to be a penitent child of God and to live a righteous life. After all, she believed the desire to do so was a crucial trait of the elect and a sign that they were the recipients of God's grace: "grant that I may so labor here that I may receiue the reweared promised to thine elect of thy free mercy and goodness" (fol. 8r). She gained resolve from this belief, praising God and those he destined for salvation: "All honour & praise be giuen to thee [God] for thy Saints whose death is precious in thy sight" (fol. 34v). Ultimately, she felt that God included her amongst such saints. Refusing to marry, Elizabeth claimed to have chosen what she termed a "private life," but she was explicit that she had not withdrawn from the world. For all the intensity of her private devotions, she insisted that she nonetheless found great joy in the company of the elect: "Yet I speeke not [of] this [private life] that I dislike of company specially of those that are thine, for my delight is with the Saints that are upon earth counting them the greatest earthly felicity and some of my kindred or frinds in whom I haue found good company haue not parted from me without my

³³ In remembering her spiritual doubts and expressing her belief in repentance, Elizabeth appropriated language from John King, *Lectures on Ionas* (London, 1611), 363. I thank those involved with the project, "Constructing Elizabeth Isham," for pointing this out.

teares” (fol. 29v). With these words, Elizabeth expressed her sense that the elect were a visible community to which she, her family, and friends belonged and from which she drew “the greatest earthly felicity” in an impure and fallen world.

PRAYER BOOK PURITANISM

On their own, none of the preceding beliefs or practices would count as peculiarly Puritan. However, taken together and considering the intensity with which Elizabeth Isham held them, they do start to look suspiciously like a godly style of religion.³⁴ With her, we seem to be dealing with a woman in many ways deeply attached to the Book of Common Prayer, and the rhythms of the English Church, but whose internal spiritual life bore many of the marks usually associated with Puritanism. This is not so incongruous a combination as conventional historical wisdom might have us believe. Indeed, if Elizabeth owed much of her fondness for the Prayer Book to her parents, she owed much of her Puritanism to the same source. As we have seen, Lady Isham took an active part in teaching her children to read and providing them with a religious education. Yet such education did not always occur through instruction, but also by example. At the root of Lady Isham’s many spiritual crises were doubts over her own election: “I remember one deepe point wherewith my mother was troubled (as many are) touching predestination & (or) falling away from grace” (fol. 12v). Although the local minister of Lamport offered some relief to Elizabeth’s mother, Lady Isham nonetheless entered into a deep melancholy over her spiritual doubts. At his wit’s end over how to help his wife, Sir John eventually called on the services of John Dod, the renowned radical-Puritan minister and local nonconformist in Northamptonshire. Making his first visit to Lamport around 1619, Dod became a regular guest in the Isham home until Lady Isham’s death in 1625.

During this period, Dod drew extremely close to Lady Isham, largely because of the divine’s spiritual ministrations. In comparison to others, like Daniel Baxter, who came to comfort Lady Isham, Dod far exceeded them: “now my mother found some comfort in those with her being not altogether so ill as she was . . . yet I neuer perseued that she receued so much comfort by any as by Mr. Dod, who hath a singular gift in comforting afflicted consciences about any I know” (fol. 11v). As Elizabeth related, Dod was a “doctor of the soul,” and his reputation for assisting people with spiritual troubles was well known in Northamptonshire, if not all of England. His abilities had an immediate effect on Lady Isham: “the very first time he came to her, she was much reuiued; when he had expounded the 28 chapter of Isai[ah] towards the end of it” (fol. 12r). Dod’s spiritual exposition proved successful, for Lady Isham’s spirits rose, causing her to leave her chamber, to which she had confined herself for some time because of her melancholy. The occasion brought joy to the family and ultimately created a trust between the Ishams and Dod, a trust that made him a proverbial fixture at Lamport Hall during Elizabeth’s youth.

Soon after his first visit, Lady Isham allowed Dod to provide religious instruction

³⁴ For thorough discussions of godly styles of religion, see Seaver, *Wallington’s World*; Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, pt. 2; and Lake, *Moderate Puritans*, chap. 7. On the darker side of godly piety, see Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination*.

to the Isham children. Recalling when she was ten, Elizabeth noted that he prescribed a strict regimen of Scriptural study: “at this time Mr. Dod appointed my selfe Sister & Brother to read 2 chapters a day the one in the Old Testament in the morning & the other in the New at night calling us to account what wee could remember & so sometimes he expounded upon it” (fol. 12r). Dod continued his tutelage on other visits, which brought Elizabeth much delight: “Now Mr. Dod comming diuers times to edifie that good worke which he had begun (for which I much reioycd) demanded of us if wee kept that order which he inioyned us of reading our chapters & relating what wee could remember” (fol. 14v). In addition to religious teaching, Dod also many times expounded Scripture to the entire Isham household. Elizabeth considered his preaching very effective, far more so than the efforts of the rector of Lamport, Daniel Baxter: “For Mr. Dod had a delightfull easy way which was very efectuall and it was the more pleaseing because he expounded those comfortable places of Scripture which the other [Baxter] did not so much, for in these times I found that this pleasant easy way [of Dod] was profitable to me” (fol. 15r). She never made any similar statements in her “Book of Remembrance” about another cleric, illustrating how large an impression Dod made on her life.

Elizabeth’s enthusiasm for Dod allowed her to benefit from an existing network of nonconformity in Northamptonshire. The county had long been a center of religious strife, with a stark division existing between radical Puritans and anti-Calvinists within its borders. Among the most noteworthy radical Puritans were the Knightleys of Fawsley and the Drydens of Canons Ashby. Both families gave haven to nonconforming ministers, like Dod, who preached throughout Northamptonshire in the homes of the landed elite.³⁵ The Ishams moved in and even attempted to marry into such circles. Consequently, if Elizabeth had indeed married John Dryden in 1631, she would have wedded the Ishams permanently to one of the most radical families of the Northamptonshire Puritan community. While she loved Dryden and likely would have willingly accepted God’s providence if the marriage had went forward, Elizabeth nonetheless would perhaps not have always agreed with her amour’s more radical religious beliefs. She left this impression when she recalled their courtship. In her mind, when the marriage negotiations soured, Dryden accepted the breakdown and simply walked away, rather than pushing for the match to continue. Remembering Dryden’s actions, Elizabeth offered a religious explanation: “I thought he reserued himselfe because his frindes was more precise then mine was and indeed I thought that the maine points of Religion was not to be hindered (or refused) by standing upon ceremony which are things indifferent” (fol. 23v). Considering Elizabeth’s reverence for the Prayer Book, it was only natural that she disagreed with the Drydens’ refusal to conform to the church’s liturgy.

She also diverged from other precise Puritan viewpoints, maintaining a certain critical distance from all that Dod extolled. In particular, she disagreed with his

³⁵ Fielding, “Conformists, Puritans,” chaps. 1 and 7, and John Fielding, “Arminianism in the Localities: Peterborough Diocese 1603–1642,” in Fincham, *Early Stuart Church*, 93–114; W. J. Sheils, *Puritans in the Diocese of Peterborough, 1558–1610* (Northampton, 1979), chaps. 6–7; Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c. 1620–1643* (Cambridge, 1997), chap. 11.

opinion when he witnessed Elizabeth and her family engaged in card playing: “In this winters euenings . . . after I had done my Chapter, which I made too much hast of that I might goe to play at cardes, master Dod came, who, seeing us at play, spake as if it were unlawfull, but my father tolde him it was but for pindes.” Elaborating on Dod’s harangue, she noted that he believed that while the children may have played for pins, such play could easily evolve into full-fledged gambling of money in the future. Elizabeth disagreed with this notion: “I am not of his opinion, for I suppose it may be lawfull with some company who onely desire it for mirth & recreation, which is best when owne [one] playeth for no more then owne [one] would willingly loose which may be without preiudis to ones selfe & not making it a trad[e] of life.” Provided that card playing occurred in moderation, without deleterious economic or moral effects, Elizabeth found nothing wrong in what she regarded as a fairly harmless pastime. She was thankful that she did not go to extremes in such play, but did admit that she could have if her circumstances had differed: “I find by my selfe (under correction) to be safe as other recreations are, although this I confesse that if I had had goode lucke I should haue loued it too well still couiting to winne.” Elizabeth believed herself fortunate that this never became a reality: “I therefore receued this benifite by it to loue it so little that I had rather doe any other lawfull thing that might bee a more certaine way of pleasure or proffit” (fol. 14v). In this case, as with her remarks on the Drydens’ precise beliefs, Elizabeth was taking a classically moderate Puritan position; like church ceremonies, the playing of cards was a “thing indifferent,” rendered sinful only by its abuse. She was no religious zealot, preferring to be judicious when it came to both religious ceremony and activities of mirth.³⁶

Such discretion came to the fore when Elizabeth compared the radical-Puritan Dod with the conformist Daniel Baxter. Of course, she held Dod in high esteem, but this did not mean that she thought he was superior to all clerics. Indeed, she was very careful to not overglorify him: “I am not of there opinion who extole Mr. Dod aboute all others.” It is ironic that she used Dod’s own teaching to justify this opinion: “it is a hard mater to make comparison . . . euery owne [one] hath his proper gift of God one after this manner and another that, neither bind I myselfe to the priuat opinion of any [for] I know there is none but hath there infirmities, as Mr Dod [has] excellently expounded.” Thus, while she may have preferred Dod as a preacher, Elizabeth did not necessarily feel that Baxter lacked merit as a minister of the Word. Instead, she put the blame squarely on her shoulders when speaking about his ability in the pulpit: “now me thinkes I should question with my selfe why I profited no more by others [Baxter] at church . . . I delighted not so much in it [his preaching] because I understood it not so well” (fol. 15r). It was not Baxter’s inability that was the reason why she did not profit from his preaching, but her own lack of understanding his sermons. Furthermore, we must remember that Elizabeth admired the conformist rector’s abilities in extemporary prayer. The contrast, therefore, drawn between Dod and Baxter, though distinctly in the former’s favor, was between relative spiritual gifts and

³⁶ Indeed, Elizabeth also found no paradox with her Puritan beliefs and reading romantic literature by authors such as Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, or with engaging in astrology. For discussion, see Stephens, “Under the Shadow,” chaps. 3 and 5.

qualities. It certainly was not a chalk-and-cheese distinction between an effectual radical-Puritan divine and an ineffectual conformist minister.

Hence, although Elizabeth admired an aggressively nonconformist minister for his piety and preaching, she nonetheless did not harbor any nonconformist beliefs herself. As we have seen, a number of historians have argued that moderate Puritanism increasingly defined the character of the English Church and was crucial to the emergence of a Calvinist consensus in the early Stuart period. In short, moderate Puritan clerics, from within the establishment, were successful in infusing the church and state with godly beliefs. Of course, Elizabeth Isham was no cleric, and her conformity did not rest on a grand objective for further reformation of the church. Indeed, her conformity was not some sort of moderate Puritan compromise, but the result of a deep devotion to the ecclesiastical and political status quo. After all, she revered the Book of Common Prayer, believed in the holiness of its liturgy, engaged the Isham servants with it, and made it an active element in the practice of her internal piety. Moreover, she was an ardent Royalist. However, her use of, and belief in, the Prayer Book did not preclude her from practicing an intense form of godly piety and associating with radical Puritans, a fact that distinguishes her from the so-called Prayer Book Protestants that Maltby argues existed in early modern England. Consequently, it appears that Elizabeth's piety was an amalgam of both Prayer Book and Puritan devotion, a conflation of religious practices that we could describe as "Prayer Book Puritanism." She likely never would have called herself a "Prayer Book Puritan," much like few among the godly applied the term Puritan to themselves. Yet, similar to how Puritanism has long been a useful concept and term to define and think about an intense form of English Protestantism in the early modern period, "Prayer Book Puritanism" may be the best, and perhaps most valuable, way to define and think about Elizabeth Isham's confessional identity and style of piety. It is an identity that seems to fly in the face of conventional historical wisdom, and it could have been more common than some historians may think.

WAS PRAYER BOOK PURITANISM "TYPICAL"?

We must return where we began this discussion—to Richard Baxter. While he was certainly critical of the Prayer Book, he was not completely adverse to using it during church services on the eve of the Civil War: "I often read the Common Prayer before I preached, both on the Lord's-days and Holy-days; but I never administered the Lord's Supper, nor ever Baptized any Child with the Sign of the Cross, nor wore the Surplice."³⁷ Baxter was not alone, for the godly John White, the noted Dorchester cleric, also found value in the service book, going so far as to begin his days by reciting its set prayers and believing that holy inspiration led to its production.³⁸ Here is continuity of the practicality that Collinson has argued Elizabethan Puritans practiced concerning the Prayer Book stretching well into the seventeenth century. Except for the possibility that the Hampton Court Con-

³⁷ Richard Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae or Mr Richard Baxter's Narrative of the Most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times* (London, 1696), 15.

³⁸ Rawlinson MSS, B 158, Bodleian Library, pp. 176–77. I am grateful to Ken Fincham for sharing this reference with me.

ference presented for further reform in 1604, there was little opportunity for substantial revision or expulsion of the Prayer Book until the 1640s. Faced with this reality, all but the most radical-Puritan divines made a compromise—they would use certain elements of the Prayer Book deemed acceptable to their godly sensibilities when administering the word and sacraments. Indeed, many of the Puritan ministers denounced in the church courts by their parishioners for non-conformity were often only cited for omitting certain parts of the liturgy, thus appearing to have taken a similar approach to the Prayer Book that Richard Baxter and White did. Furthermore, after the public fuss by men like John Field and Richard Bernard, any subsequent use of elements of the service book that godly ministers made must have acted as a positive endorsement of its acceptability and lawfulness. Finally, as Kenneth Fincham has shown, the enforcement of conformity was scarce during Elizabeth I's reign, as it was for nearly all of the early Stuart period until the Laudian reforms in the 1630s.³⁹ As long as Puritan clerics made formal professions of conformity and did not voice their dissatisfaction with elements of the Prayer Book in public, many bishops willingly ignored local adaptations to the liturgy.

Therefore, even in the parishes served by rather precise ministers, let alone by those of a more moderate ilk, the laity likely experienced a mixture of Prayer Book worship and moderate Puritan devotion. Yet, as we have seen, gaining access to how a layperson experienced this religious mixture and incorporated it into his or her spiritual life is no easy task. It requires the ability to view lay piety from within an individual's mind, something only possible truly through the prism of life-writings. Of course, the phenomenon of writing early modern diaries, autobiographies, or memoirs grew directly out of the pietist turn pioneered by moderate Puritans like Rogers, Greenham, and Perkins in the late Elizabethan period. As we have seen, under the influence of such divines, a trend emerged among the early modern laity to practice an intense form of Calvinist self-examination as a means to determine their own individual spiritual statuses of belonging either to God's reprobate or elect saints. Putting this self-examination in writing proved a useful technique for such an endeavor, for it assisted individuals in conjuring up memories of their spiritual trials, meditations, and moments of God's active presence in their lives. Besides Elizabeth's "Book of Remembrance," there are other rare examples of such life-writings from the period, including the diary of Margaret, Lady Hoby of Hackness, the earliest known religious diary in which an English woman actively engaged in the type of experimental predestinarianism promoted by the likes of Perkins.⁴⁰ Other notable cases are the spiritual writings of the London turner, Nehemiah Wallington, and within the confines of Elizabeth Isham's own county, the diaries of Robert Woodford and Grace, Lady Mildmay. In many ways, these sources support conventional wisdom that there was no compatibility between Puritanism and the Prayer Book; none of them make much mention of the

³⁹ Kenneth Fincham, "Clerical Conformity from Whitgift to Laud," in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560–1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier (Woodbridge, 2000), 125–58.

⁴⁰ See Margaret Hoby, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady: The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599–1605*, ed. Joanna Moody (Stroud, 1998).

book, and Woodford and Wallington, both radical in their religious and political beliefs, proved critical of it.⁴¹

However, if we scratch the surfaces of some of these sources, tantalizing clues emerge that lend some credibility to the notion that a mixture of Prayer Book worship and Puritan piety defined communal religious life in England. Indeed, while not often alluding to the Book of Common Prayer in her diary, Hoby nonetheless seems to have approved when her parish minister, Master Rhodes, followed the prescribed liturgy of the service book before his congregation in 1605.⁴² Combined with Baxter's moderate use of the Prayer Book, Hoby's approval of it in church ceremonies illustrates the possibility that the godly could have a certain acceptance or a genuine affection for the text in the early Stuart period. But the cases of Baxter and Hoby relate only to communal religion, not to the realm of private devotional life. Gaining a glimpse of the private use of the Prayer Book by a Puritan is not easy to attain. Although fleeting, we do have just such a glimpse from the godly John White; his apparent reverence and use of the Prayer Book did not just revolve around his conduction of church services but also centered on the cultivation of his own personal piety. After all, he admitted that he began his days by reciting the Prayer Book's set prayers. Yet, similar to Baxter and Hoby, White largely represents an anecdotal example, for the evidence of his use of the service book lacks the in-depth richness to fully view how an early modern person could synthesize and internalize an intensely godly piety with Prayer Book devotion.

Such richness is not lacking in Elizabeth Isham's "Book of Remembrance," and it affords a unique opportunity to see thoroughly what this sort of religious synthesis actually looked like from the inside. The Prayer Book immensely shaped her religious sensibilities; she admired its liturgy, revered its prescribed holy days, learned and taught from its catechism, and used its set prayers in her own daily prayers to God. Simultaneously, Elizabeth fell under the sway of early modern Calvinist literature, reading the devotional works of men like Preston, Sibbs, Dyke, and King while engaging in a form of self-examination common among the godly. Influential also were the precepts and personal example of John Dod and the memory and writings of her strenuously Puritan mother. In short, Elizabeth practiced what appears very much like a Puritan style of piety but found no contradiction in also making the Prayer Book an essential element in her religious life. The relative stability of this mixture of pious practices is remarkable in that it developed within the religious hotspot of early Stuart Northamptonshire, a county divided between radical Puritan, conformist, and anti-Calvinist elements among both the clergy and the gentry. Elizabeth's style of piety shows that such an environment need not always produce polarization and conflict but may also

⁴¹ See John Fielding, "Opposition to the Personal Rule of Charles I: The Diary of Robert Woodford, 1637-1641," *Historical Journal* 31, no. 4 (December 1988): 769-88; Linda Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman, Lady Grace Mildmay, 1552-1620* (London, 1993); Seaver, *Wallington's World*. For Woodford's and Wallington's hostility toward the Prayer Book, see David Booy, ed., *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618-1654: A Selection* (Aldershot, 2007), 250; Robert Woodford's diary, MS 9502, New College Oxford, entry 3 September 1637. I thank Richard Cust for providing me with John Fielding's valuable transcription of Woodford's diary.

⁴² Hoby, *An Elizabethan Lady*, xxxvii and 212.

prompt and enable a variety of different mixtures of religious sensibilities and practices.

Of course, we could conclude that her sort of piety was an anomaly in the early modern period—the product of one individual’s life trajectory, personal experiences, and context. In many regards, Elizabeth’s case is rather unique, rendered such by both the production and survival of her “Book of Remembrance” and by the remarkable story of religious despair, mental affliction, and physical hardship contained therein. Yet we should not forget that she was also the product of her times and the religious environment of early Stuart England. Like many other early modern Protestants, Elizabeth had exposure to the wide range of possible religious texts, practices, and traditions in the period, including devotional literature, Calvinist theology, Puritan piety, and the Book of Common Prayer. Individuals such as Richard Baxter, John White, and Margaret Hoby had similar exposure, and the anecdotal evidence that they provide suggests it made them predisposed not to wholly reject the Prayer Book despite their godly sensibilities. Indeed, we could postulate that in many parishes and households, a combination of Prayer Book devotion and the rigors of internal Puritan piety may well have been far from unusual. It certainly was not for Elizabeth, and her “Book of Remembrance” provides perhaps the most explicit evidence of how this combination worked in practice. Above all, her autobiography highlights the possibility that, at least among the laity, godly beliefs and devotion to the service book could be perfectly compatible. Consequently, we might ask whether Elizabeth Isham’s “Prayer Book Puritanism” may have been at least as “typical” of lay religion before the Civil War as that of many of the people who presented nonconformist ministers to the church courts or petitioned Parliament in defense of episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer.