

## THE ENGLISH REFORMATION REVISITED

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I was asked by the Society to provide an introduction to current historical thinking about the English Reformation in the first talk to the 1995 Conference. The ensuing lecture was deliberately intended to provide guidance through the minefield of controversy about the success of Reformation for those with only limited knowledge of sixteenth-century history. Debates about the Reformation have always been of obvious importance to both theologians and historians: they have usually in the past been profoundly influenced by confessional ideologies. In the last thirty years the nature of the questions asked about Reformation has undergone marked change: specifically the issue of popular religious belief and practice has assumed a centrality it never before possessed. But new questions have not brought closer agreement on the nature of religious change, and in recent years fierce debate has continued to rage on such issues as the vitality of late medieval Catholicism, the popularity of the early reformers and the motives of Henry VIII and his successors. Some, at least, of these controversies are still bound up with Protestant, Catholic and Anglican identities in the late twentieth century. Since the continuities between past and present were the theme of last year's Conference, I have touched on these identities, but have left it to others, especially Dr Rowell and Dr Rex to make these connections more explicit.

In the late spring of 1539 Archbishop Cranmer had just fought a bitter battle in the House of Lords in opposition to the Act of Six Articles, which was designed to return England to a more fully Catholic position upon sacraments and discipline. As so often, Cranmer seemed to lead a charmed life: Henry apparently not only accepted his opposition, he claimed that he wished to see a fuller statement of his doctrinal arguments. Nevertheless, there was the threat of reprisals in the air, and the conservatives watched greedily for any error on the archbishop's part. It is of this period that Cranmer's secretary, Ralph Morice, told a story to the martyrologist John Foxe; a story that illustrates the divisions of religion within London and the vulnerability of the reformers. Cranmer prepared his defence, basing his position carefully, says Morice, on Scripture and the Fathers, and gave his secretary the material to fair-copy. The work completed, Morice had to cross from Lambeth to London on other business, carrying his precious text with him for security. As the ferry negotiated the Thames, however, it came upon the King and the Court watching bear-baiting, which was being conducted on barges on the river. The passengers, who included several yeomen of the guard, urged the boatman in close to the shore for a good view. Suddenly 'the bear brake loose and came into the boat where the secretary was . . .'. Morice's colleagues beat a hasty retreat, leaving him 'in the end of the wherry, up to the middle in water' and so scared that the book was shaken out of his hands into the river. In the ensuing confusion it was saved from the water by the bearward. The text had fallen into dangerous hands, since the bearward, a minor member of Princess Elizabeth's household, was an 'arrant papist'. He handed the book to a sympathetic London priest, standing on the bank, to interpret, and the priest urged him to show it to Bishop Stephen Gardiner.

Morice knew that he had to regain the text, so he first sought help from one Blage, a city draper, who was known for his reformist sympathies. Blage used the arts of persuasion, both verbal and financial, on the bearward, to no avail. The

reformers then knew that they had to invoke greater power, and turned to Thomas Cromwell. The next morning, as the bearward waited outside the Council chamber in the hope of catching Gardiner, Cromwell passed through and simply swept the book from his hands, denouncing him as an arrant knave for taking the property of others. But in the chamber itself Cromwell greeted the archbishop with mocking words which acknowledged the danger of this type of incident in the factional world of Henrician politics "My lord: I have found here good stuff for you, ready to bring both you and this good fellow your man to the halter . . ."<sup>1</sup>

We might draw various morals from the amusing tale of the papist bearward. The most important for my purposes is that it vividly describes a moment of high tension about religious politics in an intimate, face-to-face, society. The parish priest and the bearward were offered briefly the opportunity to be actors in a drama that could help to determine the fate of an archbishop, or could drive a further nail into the coffin of the hopes of the earliest reformers. There was much about the course of the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations that was contingent, dependent upon the immediate choices of vulnerable monarchs and volatile elites. There was also much that encouraged 'ordinary' men and women to be participant in a series of crises that would determine their religious identities. To put it another way: the worlds of high politics and the court and of London cannot be insulated from one another in a reading of the Reformation.

In this way Morice's tale points us towards the modern historiography of the Reformation, and in particular to the transformation wrought by A. G. Dickens, whose *English Reformation*, published in 1964, is the Ur-text of modern scholarship. Dickens clearly drew on a powerful and complex tradition of Reformation writing, but his work was also sharply differentiated from the narratives that extended from Thomas Fuller and Gilbert Burnet in the seventeenth century to Philip Hughes in the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> I think Christopher Haigh best sums up the difference: 'he added the men and women who experienced religious change, and showed how and why new religions appealed to some of them'. To this I would add that Dickens showed how what the French call the *menu peuple* could become active agents of change, either by the fortune of their situation, or by the more general power of their commitment to new ideals. The latter served to strengthen the resolve of wavering political and religious elites: to convince them that reform was both viable and popular.

Dickens took the tradition of John Foxe, that first exponent of a popular view of Reformation, and expanded it by showing that religious enthusiasm could be traced far beyond the limited ranks of the martyrs. He would not, of course, have selected my bearward's story as archetypal of the engagement of ordinary men and women in the experience of Reformation—it is too contingent and also too obviously a narrative of reform's opponents. Instead, his choice would probably have been Robert Williams, shepherd to the humanist parson William Latimer. In 1546 Williams recorded in the margin of an abridged version of the historian Polydore Vergil the following protest against Henry VIII's restrictions on bible-reading:

At Oxforde, the yere 1546, browt down to Seynbury  
by John Darbye, the pryse 14d when I kepe Mr Letymer's  
shepe. I bout thys boke when the Testament was  
abrogated that shepeherdys myght not red hit. I  
prey God amende that blyndnes.

Dickens's work exercised a fundamental influence on other historians above all

<sup>1</sup> John Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* ed. J. Pratt, (8 vols, 1877), v, pp. 388–91.

<sup>2</sup> A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* 2nd ed. (1989). Useful guidance on the bibliography of the English Reformation can be found in R. O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (1986). For discussion of more recent developments see C. Haigh (editor) *The English Reformation Revisited* (1988).

because of its insistence on the constant interaction between doctrine and high politics on the one hand and popular attitudes on the other. This demanded a new kind of research, one that happened to be well-suited to the general directions that historical research was taking in the 1960s and the 1970s. There was an enthusiasm for more local research, more engagement with the ideas of the population beyond the elites: history 'from below' rather than exclusively 'from above'. It is no exaggeration to say that the consequence has been a minor industry of Reformation scholarship—diocesan studies, regional studies, urban studies, group studies, micro studies—the list is endless. In the last decade some of the enthusiasm for 'history from below' which marked my graduate generation has dissipated in the cold climate of Thatcherism, but the basic commitment to local and popular analysis of religion has survived remarkably well. Recent work in this field has included specialist studies of dissent and radicalism, such as Christopher Marsh's *Family of Love* and Margaret Spufford's *World of Rural Dissenters, 1520–1725*, and the beginnings of a further proto-industry of parochial studies in the hands of Beat Kumin, John Craig and Susan Wright.<sup>3</sup> The methods employed by these studies are no longer necessarily those suggested by Dickens, and there are new themes, such as the role and status of women, but the linear descent from earlier work is clear.

So A. G. Dickens articulated a new methodological direction in Reformation studies and urged historians to ask distinctive questions of distinctive evidence, for example wills or churchwardens' accounts. The result for England has been an impressive accumulation of evidence about the religious experience of localities and individuals, which has only been matched elsewhere in Europe in the case of Germany. I am currently reminded of this in my own work: I am endeavouring to write a history of the Reformation in Britain, for which the historiography of England is completely out of synchronisation with that of Scotland and Ireland, where local studies began much later, and still sometimes languish for lack of sufficient evidence.

But while Dickens's methodological insights have proved so powerful, the contents of his argument soon revealed weaknesses. The issue here touches closely, I think, on the theme of this conference—Anglican identities. Dickens, finishing his Reformation narrative in about 1560, is often claimed by hostile historians to have tried to demonstrate the inevitable triumph of Protestantism, and hence of Anglicanism, by that date. I do not think that a careful reading of his text will sustain this criticism—there is much more sense of the contingent, and of a careful balancing of the successes and failures of Protestantism to acknowledge any simple piece of 'Whiggish' teleology. However, he does seek to demonstrate firstly a widespread support for reform by this date and secondly the formation of a religious consciousness that we could label Anglican. There are numerous examples of embattled Protestant minorities, or radicalism and of conflict, in Dickens's text, but there is also a belief in the beginnings of a *via media*, a belief on which I can only quote him:

As a people we [the English] have scarcely grasped the deepest implications of either Catholicism or Protestantism; we have tended to avoid the peaks and the abysses of both, and our greatest men have seldom found it easy to operate within the framework of either. If we have in any respect excelled, it has been in the provision of conditions enabling average Christians to practise a devotion heartfelt enough, yet not so deeply committed as to demand a severance from secular activities and values.

This is apropos only of the possible contribution that Cromwell and Cranmer

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<sup>3</sup> C. Marsh, *The Family of Love in English Society 1550–1630* (Cambridge, 1994). M. Spufford (ed.), *The World of Rural Dissenters 1520–1725* (1995). A. Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation of the Parishes: the Ministry and the Reformation in Town and Country* (Manchester, 1995). S. Wright (ed.), *Parish, Church and People: Local Studies in Lay Religion, 1350–1750* (1988).

might have made to the first tentative formation of such a consciousness in the 1530s.

The origins of the reaction to Dickens's views are various. A generation of excellent Catholic scholars have found his Anglican complacency, his sense of moderate Protestantism as the best of all possible worlds, well-nigh intolerable. In the study of the Reformation entrenched ideologies die hard, and the advance of detailed and apparently value-neutral scholarship, does not necessarily make interpretation any more ecumenical. Jack Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy and, among younger scholars, Richard Rex, all approach the Reformation as committed Catholics. For them the archetypal figure of Reformation England is neither the opportunist bearward, nor the bible-reading shepherd, but Roger Martyn, a man of Long Melford, who in the early seventeenth century looked back to his childhood in the 1530s. In Martyn's Long Melford the pre-Reformation church was rich with images and altars, with colourful vestments and sacred vessels. The ritual year was intensely patterned, leading the parishioner through a series of liturgical moments that lent meaning to the devotional cycle. Eamon Duffy, in particular, leads his readers to mourn with Martyn the world we, as heirs to Dickens's supposedly moderate Protestantism, have lost. Except that the word lost, with its connotations of tristesse and nostalgia, seems too passive a term for Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars*, whose very title highlights the conflict and violence at work in the destruction of traditional religion.<sup>4</sup>

But it would be improper to suggest that the revisionist historiography of the Reformation flourishes only as a Catholic reaction to Anglican triumphalism. In fact Dickens set a methodological agenda that was of significance in its own right, but that also contained the potential to subvert his conclusion—that there was a popular enthusiasm for religious change and a general acceptance of an Anglican settlement. To go to local and regional sources was not necessarily to conclude that all was consistent with this Protestant story. It is here that the work of Christopher Haigh, now finally in book-form as *English Reformations*, is crucial.<sup>5</sup> Haigh is methodologically at one with Dickens in his belief in the need for intensive research on 'the people', on the attitudes of those affected by religious change, but his conclusions are very different. It is interesting to observe that both historians started their work from northern sources: Dickens examining Yorkshire, found convincing evidence of changing attitudes against the grain of a traditional culture, Haigh, investigating Lancashire, saw largely the failure of new religious initiatives. Haigh examines a similar geography and similar sources, the wills, churchwardens' accounts and court cases, to argue for what in shorthand he calls 'slow Reformation'. The tenacity of old Catholic consciousness is, for Haigh, far more than a question of mere survivalism, it reflects the vitality of late medieval Catholicism and the difficulty the reformers experienced in bludgeoning it into submission. For Haigh, as well as Scarisbrick and Duffy, the memoir of Roger Martyn is paradigmatic. Indeed, the conviction that late medieval popular Catholicism was in robust health is perhaps the most widely shared conclusion of the group of revisionist historians. Some of those working exclusively on the pre-Reformation years, such as C. Harper-Bill, J. A. F. Thomson and R. N. Swanson, have also reinforced this reading of popular belief.<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, a highly visible culture of devotion to be recaptured from the late Middle Ages: it was costly, made a powerful

<sup>4</sup> J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984). E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (1992). R. Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (1993).

<sup>5</sup> C. Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> C. Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England: 1400–1530* (1988). J. A. F. Thomson, *The Early Tudor Church and Society: 1485–1529* (1994). R. N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989).

appeal to the emotions and, as the evidence of wills demonstrates, was supported almost universally by those ranks of society that possessed any wealth.

Revisionist historians have more difficulty with the end of the Reformation story than its beginning. Some like Scarisbrick, avoid much of the problem about why Protestantism succeeded by concentrating on Catholic survival, others like Duffy talk of a slow and essentially reluctant accommodation by much of the populace to the act of state that had swept away the old faith. Again, it is probably Haigh's arguments that appear most convincing. He insists that the story needs to be continued almost to the end of Elizabeth's reign, since by then a process of assimilation and adaptation had occurred which, if it did not make the majority of the population into vigorous Protestants, at least translated them into what he calls 'parish Anglicans', who began to adhere to the basis of the new faith as they had done the old. In investigating the story of religious change between Henry VIII and the middle of Elizabeth's reign revisionists tend to minimise the popular impact of the changes of the 1530s and the reign of Edward VI, to stress enthusiasm for Henry VIII's period of reaction in the 1540s, and above all to see Mary's reign as a period of success in the revitalisation of Catholic behaviour in the parishes. Perhaps the greatest intellectual strain for an unreconstructed Anglican is to have to address the encomia of Duffy and Haigh on 'Bloody Mary'—Haigh asserts that by 1558 'from the parish level, at least, it seemed the old religion was invincible'.

At about this point the competent undergraduate essay on the Reformation stops regarding it as an historiographical tennis-match, and struggles for a paragraph or two to offer some independent evaluation of the evidence before sketching a hasty conclusion. May I therefore take a few minutes to do the same. I do not particularly want to indict a balance sheet pro and con the above interpretations, though I would just reiterate that Dickens's essential methodology is still taking us far into an understanding of local religion, but that the revisionists have made a powerful case for the strength of traditional religious loyalties. Instead I want to ask how the **questions** asked by Reformation historians might be changed, indeed in some measure how they are already changing. In particular, I want to ask how much farther the accumulation of local and specific evidence, used by both sides in the above debates, can take us in understanding the nature of, and reasons for, religious change. There is still a tendency for historians following Dickens's basic methodology to plead for yet more local studies (I have done this myself) since it will give a better grasp of the formation of Protestant identities (or indeed their rejection). I characterise this to my students as the 'it all depended on what happened in Much Snoring' mentality. Revisionists are slightly less prone to this, since they usually assume from their models that **nothing** new happened in Much Snoring. But the best of the micro-studies I mentioned earlier are breaking away from this mentality more completely. They deny that they are illuminating the state of the nation's religion by examining Lollardy or the Family of Love: dissent and parochial patterns of belief have, on this argument, their own inner religious and social history, and should not, at least in the first instance, be pressed into service as part of a national analysis.

Another form in which the current debate can be rejected, one interestingly which has been used before when competing visions of English history have arrived at stalemate, is to play the international card, to denounce Anglocentricity and to insist that religious change can only be understood in a wider European framework. The theologians have, of course, never forgotten this, and it is encouraging to see that important new work on English theologians, such as Carl Trueman's *Luther's Legacy* on the soteriology of Tyndale, Barnes and Hooper, is reminding historians of their tendency to narrow the geography of reform. The recent fashion for the study of ethnicity and national identity is having its effect on English Reformation through comparative history, especially of the British

Isles.<sup>7</sup>

But none of this really addresses the major issues raised by the debate about the popular reformation. Does it in fact matter as much as our protagonists have suggested that something did, or did not, happen in Much Snoring? How far were Tudor monarchs and their religious counsellors responsive to the concerns and needs of the populace? And, accepting here some of the revisionist case, why were they willing to risk religious upheaval in the face of the apparent resistance of a majority of the king's subjects? Something approximating to these questions might be thought to have been answered by an older historiography which analysed on the one hand the ideological commitments of the early reformers, on the other the political and financial needs of the crown and the landed elite. But there is an awareness that a more subtle and complex narrative is needed in the face of the advances of the last thirty years, that the interaction between leading reformers, crown, court, government and gentry requires more reflection, and perhaps different methodological approaches. One advance has been in the detailed study of political faction, in understanding the process by which the royal mind was influenced by men of the court, the contingent element in religious change. The careful unpacking of an incident such as the 1543 Prebendaries' Plot in Glyn Redworth's study of Bishop Gardiner, is a good example of the possibilities of this approach. The 1540s, especially the factional crises surrounding Henry's death, which were so crucial for the first phase of Protestantism, still merit more of this kind of close approach. A different set of possibilities is sketched in Diarmaid MacCulloch's *The Later Reformation in England*. Here the focus is firmly on doctrine, but doctrine that is translated into political and social action. For example, John Hooper's challenge to the bishops when he refused to wear vestments for his consecration in 1550 is seen as a decisive moment in the development, or perhaps it would be better to say arrest of the development, of an Anglican consciousness. Since Hooper's challenge was repulsed this became, in MacCulloch's words, 'the high-water mark of Protestant advance'.<sup>8</sup>

If MacCulloch indicates a way of reconceptualising the Reformation which places doctrine in action at its heart, Margaret Aston suggests a different, but complementary approach, in her work on iconoclasm. She shows that the fear of idolatry provides a far more powerful motive for action to the reformers than a narrow emphasis on iconoclasm might suggest. The zeal of reformers under Edward and in the early years of Elizabeth's reign produced a vigorous campaign of literary and visual propaganda that seems to have influenced the ruling elite and disposed it in favour of a radical attack on popish remnants. Aston's readings suggest that an embattled minority, whose strength came from the intensity of their loathing for the traditional culture, could motivate the small governing elite to respond, even when political caution might have encouraged them to seek compromise, or avoid antagonising a hostile populace. The erratic behaviour of Edward VI's Lord Protector Somerset, is probably to be explained by the contradictory pressures of political caution and pragmatism, voiced constantly by his closest adviser William, Lord Paget, and the fervour of his circle of religious advisers, men such as William Turner and Thomas Becon, who had him dispensing bibles by the cartload during his Scottish campaign that led to the victory at Pinkie.<sup>9</sup>

So, I would suggest that the time has come, for the present at least, to set aside

<sup>7</sup> C. Trueman, *Luther's Legacy: Salvation and the English Reformers* (Oxford, 1994). For essays on the British context of religious change see S. Ellis and S. Barber (eds.) *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State* (1995).

<sup>8</sup> G. Redworth, *In Defence of the Church Catholic: the Life of Stephen Gardiner* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 176–207. D. MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England: 1547–1603* (1990).

<sup>9</sup> M. Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws against Images* (Oxford, 1988) and *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (Cambridge, 1993).

the religious politics of Much Snoring, and to return to those groups and individuals who we know had an ability to influence events at the centre. We should be considering anew the importance of theology, of factional politics, of the beliefs of the elites, and incorporating into our analyses advances in the use of source material such as art and literature, as well as the results of the rich seam of local studies that have been produced in the last decades. We need above all to ask why there was a Reformation when the revisionists have argued to us that it was neither needed nor desired. The impressive achievement of A. G. Dickens's work was that it both opened a new area for research, and sketched a synthetic solution to the problems it identified. That synthesis probably now has to be abandoned: it will be some time before anything as convincing can be put in its place.

My excursion into historiography has, I fear, proceeded somewhat obliquely to the main theme of this conference—Anglican identities. So could I make amends in the last few moments by asking what bearing any of the foregoing might have on our understanding of the early nature of the Church of England? There were cynics, then as now, who suggested that to be an 'Anglican' was to be no more than an adherent of royal policy. My favourite squib is that of Sir John Harington, writing in Elizabeth's reign, who thus described a Henrician courtier:

One of King Henries Favorites beganne,  
 To move the King one day to take a man,  
 Whom of his Chamber he might make a Groome,  
 Soft, sayd the King, before I graunt that roome,  
 It is a question not to be neglected,  
 How he in his religion stands affected.  
 For his Religion, answered then the Minion,  
 I doe not certaine know whats his opinion:  
 But sure he may, talking with men of learning,  
 Conforme himselfe in lesse then ten days warning.

A rather more spiritually earnest version of the same essential point—that to be a true Christian was to be a king's man—was offered by Richard Morison, one of Cromwell's propagandists in the 1530s. Henry VIII, said Morison, was God's 'chosen king, a prynce that chyefelye above all thinges hath foughte and seketh, to sette forthe his glorie, to restore his holy worde, to put downe hypocrysie, to banishe idolatry, and finally to bryng this ones to passe, yt al his people, may be as they are called, that is trewe chrystians'.<sup>10</sup>

But Dickens, supported by the work of Geoffrey Elton, was at pains to insist that Henry's Reformation also bred a new ideology, a middle way between 'Romish' superstition and 'licentious' heresy, here using Thomas Cromwell's language before the 1540 Parliament. This was the vision of the English church that men such as Thomas Starkey espoused. More recent research on Henry VIII's representation as a Davidic king, bound in the Old Testament manner to reform and unify Israel, adds a further and more convincing dimension to this idea of a distinctive Church of England after the break with Rome. A full awareness of the possibilities of identifying the people of England with the people of Israel was delayed until later in the century, but from the very beginning the propagandists regarded it as important to reassure their audiences that Henry was acting according to biblical norms. The arch of spiritual authority was now represented by the Book in the hands of the King.<sup>11</sup>

Those fully committed to reform, however, were unlikely to accept some loose

<sup>10</sup> Richard Morison, *An Inveictive against the great and detestable vice of treason* (1539), fo. 5a.

<sup>11</sup> There are discussions of the application of ideas of Old Testament kingship in J. N. King, *Tudor Royal Iconography* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 54 ff. and in Rex, *Henry VIII*, pp. 104–105.

concept of a realm governed by the principles of Davidic kingship as sufficient to produce a fully Protestantised Church of England. Certainly, the concept of *cuius regio, eius religio* was accepted, but the godly prince had to preside over a full reformation, whose objectives were to conform the English to the best standards of the continental Reformation. The thrust of much historical writing in recent years has been to demonstrate that the attempt to achieve full reform was a divisive process, a matter of intense confrontation between the godly and the profane, a battle in the minds of the reformers between the forces of Christ and of AntiChrist. Irenic voices sometimes pleaded for moderation, on politic or even ideological grounds, but they are argued to have been in a small minority. If there was an Anglican identity in the first fifty years of the Reformation perhaps we have to find it more in a vigorous but embattled zealous Protestantism, rather than in a moderate pietism growing within a state church. It is a truism, of course, that each age offers its own reinterpretation of its past—is it accidental that historians now wish to stress that the Reformation brought not the peace of national unity and social harmony, but a sword?