What Happened to English Catholicism after the English Reformation?

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Abstract
This article looks again at how historians have discussed Roman Catholicism in England after Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558. Some scholarly treatments of the topic have represented it as a popular but essentially introspective parish religion. Others have taken it to be an active clericalist force in early modern English national politics. This has made it difficult to define Catholicism’s place in Elizabethan and early Stuart England. Of course, Catholicism in this period clearly had a range of meanings. This article tries to draw some of them together by probing a series of contemporary opinions about Catholicism, and how contemporaries thought it could be expressed and practised.

It was once intellectually respectable in English Reformation studies to take for granted the abject decline of ‘medieval’ Catholicism and the easy triumph of Protestantism. The best, and certainly most readable, exponent of this approach was A. G. Dickens. Yet such certainties were displaced quite soon after Dickens published The English Reformation in 1964. A consensus that medieval Christianity was, by the early years of the sixteenth century, facing oblivion gave way to doubts about the attractiveness and success of the Protestant experiment. Some Reformation historiography now mimicked the influential anti-teleological anti-whiggism of revisionist studies of the English Civil War. While historians of king and parliament, such as Kevin Sharpe and Conrad Russell, denied the inevitability of administrative and political breakdown before 1640, some scholars of the sixteenth-century English Protestant Reformation, especially Christopher Haigh, suggested that the notion of a sweeping Protestant conquest in 1559 was a fiction. Catholicism...
was actually hardier than its supposedly victorious Protestant rival. Protestantism did not, in fact, reform popular religion. The story of the English Reformation was actually one of a central regime's failure to force Protestantism on the people because the religion of the people was naturally averse to the evangelical rhetoric of the Protestant clerics who preached Reformation from the pulpit.\(^4\)

Although the revisionist readings of early Stuart government and the origins of the English Civil War were met by a vigorous scholarly critique,\(^5\) a similar debate did not at once develop around the late Tudor Reformation. In the 1980s there was little more than the faintest whiff of conflict between the revisionist account of an enduring Catholic popular culture, and those, such as Patrick Collinson, who charted the rise of a Protestant–Puritan identity and culture in the English church during the same period.\(^6\) There was a somewhat unimaginative consensus that Catholicism, the losing side in the national reorientation of theology, church government, liturgy and popular religion, at first flourished after 1559 primarily as a self-conscious non-Protestant sacramentalism served by Marian priests. It existed, however, mainly within the boundaries of the national church. Later on some people expressed their Catholicism by actually separating from the Church of England. Their Catholicism is often referred to as ‘recusancy’ because they refused to attend their parish churches as the law required. But only a small minority of Catholics ever became recusants. The vast majority of Catholic-minded people were happy to embrace a more indeterminate non-Protestant quasi-conformist parish religion (which historians sometimes call ‘parish Anglicanism’). This did not happen, however, because the state forced people to conform. Instead, runs the crucial part of the revisionist argument, the self-appointed guardians of renascent English Romanism, the seminary priests trained on the continent, returned home and limited their attentions to a small fraction of the Catholic population, the gentry (their social equals). Their function should have been to safeguard the still considerable residuum of popular English Catholicism. But they did not even bother to venture much beyond the Home Counties into the remoter areas, the ‘dark corners’ of the land, where Catholicism was naturally strongest. The seminary priests thus turned a consciously Catholic irritable conformism among the mass of the people into a pacific non-Romish conformity. Conscious Catholicism was reduced to the religion


of a tiny minority. The seminarists’ apologists, such as the famous Jesuit Robert Persons, manufactured a myth when they talked up the seminarists’ achievements and, pouring scorn on the efforts of the Marian priests since 1558, claimed that the new clergy were the preservers of English Catholicism.

Thus, by the 1580s, popular Catholicism, a non-Protestant sacramental culture, was deprived of its sacramental sustenance. It lost its overtly Romish overtones, and reached an accommodation with the parish church and the regime, though not, of course, with evangelical Protestantism. Haigh goes so far as to argue that it could be expressed through an affection for the Book of Common Prayer. This revisionist perception of Catholic ‘continuity’ has now been assimilated into some of the readings of pre-Civil War ecclesiastical politics. While Nicholas Tyacke produced a very influential thesis that a small and revolutionary faction of ‘anti-Calvinists’ in the early Stuart church challenged the broadly Calvinist theological consensus which that church had inherited from the sixteenth century, some historians have questioned his account by citing evidence of widespread popular quasi-Catholicism in the early seventeenth century. They argue that this residuum of conservative religious opinion in the Church of England may well have welcomed the initiatives of Archbishop William Laud and other like-minded clerics. So perhaps anti-Calvinism was not so unrepresentative as Tyacke claimed. Other readings of Catholicism in this period, notably John Bossy’s, which did not see Catholicism as simply a conservative impulse, have not been paid as much attention as they deserve.

Recently, though, some very effective critiques of the revisionist approach have started to appear. Eamon Duffy, who, in his *Stripping of the Altars*, provided massive underpinning for the ‘new’ interpretation of the popularity of the old religion on the eve of the Reformation, is considerably more subtle in his reading of what happened to the old religion. Duffy makes it clear that the Catholic impulse which remained after the ravages of Henrician, Edwardian and Elizabethan statutes, injunctions and visitas-

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11 For example, John Bossy’s work does not figure in Rosemary O’Day’s survey of the literature on the ‘Reformation and the People’ in her *Debate on the English Reformation* (1986), ch. 6.
tions was not tied to the physical expressions of late medieval devotion. Even in Mary’s reign, when the regime was Catholic again, Catholic impulses and proclivities were already being directed away from the old world which Duffy describes so well. And Judith Maltby has shown that, while it is just about possible to argue that, after 1558, unreformed religion could be expressed in and around the rituals of the prayer book, it is extremely misleading to suggest that English Catholicism was channelled thereby into prayer-book conformity. Those who defended the integrity of the observances and rituals of the Book of Common Prayer were really not religious conservatives harking back to a pre-Reformation past.

Even so, the revisionist account of post-Reformation Catholicism still raises all sorts of problems in our narrative of change of religion in England’s Reformation. This is because it largely fails to engage with the orthodox and, at one time, central political narratives of scholars such as Mark Tierney, Philip Hughes and John Pollen, which it has tried to replace. These accounts were virtually unanimous in their certainty that Catholicism experienced a massive, radical and politically significant revival in the middle of Elizabeth’s reign. Admittedly, these older narratives do look remarkably old-fashioned and polemical nowadays. For the Elizabethan period they seem obsessed with the fiendish intricacies of the plots around Mary Stuart. They concentrate heavily on the seminaries, the ‘mission’ of Edmund Campion and Robert Persons, and the seminary priests’ struggle against the proscription of the Roman faith, which they celebrate by reciting the martyrologies compiled by Catholic polemists. Also, an embarrassingly substantial quantity of this Catholic historiography is dominated by turgid accounts of the internal political history of English Catholicism. Most of it seems absolutely irrelevant to the larger history of the period. It is difficult to think that anyone should now want to study, for example, the ‘Appellant controversy’, that intensely bad-tempered and seemingly petty struggle, commencing in the late 1590s, between leading secular priests and Jesuits.

On one level, of course, the older Catholic narratives, which drew on state papers and diplomatic correspondence, were simply about the activism of a politically aware minority. The subsequent revisionist account, which relied heavily on local archives, was about a conservative religious culture which was far removed from the supposedly lunatic plots of crazed popish conspirators and the bickering of bookish priests. Yet, even in the orthodox, deeply polemical, histories of Catholic heroism, resistance and suffering, there is in fact quite a sophisticated rhetoric about the continuity of Catholicism more generally, in particular as it was

expressed through separatism and semi-separatism, i.e. recusancy and various shades of occasional conformity. For these Catholic scholars, recusancy was definitely not a sign of the retreat of Catholicism into a quiet gentrified indolence. Moreover, all of these narratives, new and old, do refer to their topic as ‘Catholicism’ and trace it back to the central quarrel between the new religion and the older faith which the Elizabethan regime sought to replace. It is essential, to avoid the field being broken up into isolated and irreconcilable fragments, to look again at what the continuity of Catholicism means between the Reformation and the Civil War. Catholicism clearly mutated after 1559, but there is more to be said about when and how this happened. Haigh’s use of the term ‘Catholicism’ is very loose, a catch-all for virtually any non-Protestant sacramentalism. A few Puritan zealots would have concurred with this usage but most contemporaries would not. We need a more developed, politically sensitive, model of Catholicism in this period before we can say what happened to it, and thus avoid the farce of two historians working from very largely the same set of sources with one stating that the Protestant Reformation was a ‘howling success’ (in establishing a Protestant culture) and the other that it hardly happened at all (because of Catholic survivalism). It is necessary to look at what contemporaries, particularly Catholics, said about Catholicism, and in what political contexts, in order to see how post-Reformation Catholicism was defined.

After 1559, the single overriding characteristic of whatever it was in the English church which defined itself as Roman Catholic (in opposition to Protestant reforming tendencies) was that it entirely lacked its own national establishment. The national church which looked to the supreme governor retained, however, very many people whose religious sentiments could not be described in any sense as Protestant or evangelical. Some of them hardly concealed their Catholic leanings. For Eamon Duffy, the ‘elderly ex-friar’ who in 1583 told his congregation at Binfield in Berkshire that he would say mass again if Catholicism was officially restored ‘was no doubt exceptional’, but conforming Marian priests, such as John Dalby, rector of Heyford Warren in Oxfordshire from 1557 to the 1580s, wrote explicitly Catholic clauses into their wills. In Clapham in Sussex we find, beneficed until 1606, a Church of England minister, David Evans, who, in the 1580s was, apparently, persuading people to go to the English College in Rome, Henry Shales, rector of Hangleton, attacked Puritans

16 Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, p. 589; Alan Davidson, ‘Roman Catholicism in Oxfordshire from the Late Elizabethan Period to the Civil War c.1580–1640’, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Bristol, 1970) [hereafter Davidson, ‘Roman Catholicism’], p. 375.
17 Public Record Office, State Papers [hereafter PRO, SP] 12/133/33, fo. 65r.

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in the archdeaconry of Lewes so vigorously in the mid-1580s that they accused him of subscribing to popish doctrines, and he too admitted he had urged people to go abroad and study in the seminaries. Protestant reform of fabric and fittings was undoubtedly delayed by sentimental as well as economic constraints. As late as 1589 Edward Culpeper of Ardingly in Sussex was surprised that the bishop of Chichester’s consistory court thought the retention of a piece of a rood loft in Ardingly church was in any way offensive. Indeed, post-Marian Catholicism could happily inhabit a number of local establishments, in particular the noble and gentry households which adhered to the old religion, perhaps even the occasional conservative parish.

So, in one sense, the continuity of Catholicism can be detected by simply counting individuals who, in some measure, refused to conform silently and completely to the established church in England as Elizabeth’s regime required that they should. But, as Alexandra Walsham’s work on conformity and church papistry has shown, a vast range of Catholic opinions could be expressed in such behaviour. The blunt and sweeping terms which were employed to describe these nonconformists, lumping them all into such categories as ‘recusant’ and ‘church papist’, may well, if read uncritically, lead us into too easy assumptions about what those behavioural patterns mean. We cannot automatically assume that the sources which provide us with lists of a few popish recusants and many church papists (episcopal visitation material, consistory court books, exchequer records and the like) are telling us only that by the 1580s Catholicism was declining into a quiescent gentrified minority of absolute recusants, while the Catholic-minded majority turned into equally quiescent parish Anglicans.

For Catholic nonconformist behaviour directly fuelled a serious political debate about what constituted conformity, and about the degree to which a man had to conform to satisfy the state. From 1559 this was crucial in defining what it meant to be a Catholic in England. English Catholic intellectuals, safely shut away with their books in their chambers in foreign universities, challenged their Protestant counterparts to defend reformed doctrines (and implicitly or explicitly criticized the regime for allowing such errors to go unchecked). But Catholicism’s struggle with the regime in England itself did not focus only on rival confessions of faith. It was voiced just as much in a bitter dialogue about how far it kept within or transgressed the regime’s statutory definitions of what

18 PRO, SP 12/160/12.
19 West Sussex Record Office, Ep II/9/5, fo. 153v.
20 See David Crankshaw’s forthcoming monograph on the clerical patronage of the Catholic aristocracy up to 1588.
21 Michael O’Dwyer, ‘Catholic Recusants in Essex c.1580 to c.1600’, unpublished MA thesis (University of London, 1960), pp. 24–5, noting the case of an Essex churchwarden who refused to present recusants because he would have to ‘present the whole parish’ (cited in Davidson, ‘Roman Catholicism’, p. 316).
22 Walsham, Church Papists, passim.
constituted a loyal and acceptable conformity and obedience to the will of the supreme governor of the Church of England.

The politically explosive intervention by the Jesuits Edmund Campion and Robert Persons, who arrived in England in 1580 in the middle of the regime’s crisis over the Anjou match, was broadcast principally by the priests’ use of unlicensed and secretly distributed tracts urging recusancy as an issue of conscience. This was a calculated disruption of the previous working compromise between the regime and the queen’s Catholic subjects over how they should distinguish between their obedience to the sovereign and to God. Whatever else they were, such clerical incendiaries were not, as Christopher Haigh seems to think, the anaesthetizers of English Catholicism through some desire for a quiet life in the company of the gentry. Admittedly, little enough is known about many of these priests. But take, for instance, the very active seminary priest William Anlaby, who, in Haigh’s rendering, returned to England in 1578 and for four years subscribed to an ungentrified pattern of Catholic clerical service. He worked in the north, among the poor, dressed casually and travelled on foot. But then he ‘bought a horse, improved his clothes, turned his attention to the gentry and, for a time, moved south’. As Anlaby mounts his horse, we are, figuratively, supposed to see English seminarian Catholicism abandoning the struggle to preserve popular Catholic religion against the will of the state. Yet Anlaby returned to the north to join the members of a multifarious clerical faction around the retainers of the Neville family (the mainstay of the 1569 rebellion). He was arrested as the members of that faction, many of whom were leading recusants and church papists, were hunted down by the Northern Council during the war years, and he was executed for treason. When we look at Anlaby’s political activities we may well think that the function of these seminary priests was not limited to preserving an ‘old world’ which predated the imposition of royal injunctions and Protestant episcopal and archidiaconal visitations.

The politics of conformity can be glimpsed from a brief view of the state’s proceedings against Catholics. The church courts, of course, indiscriminately prosecuted all sorts of absenteeism (contrary to the 1559 Act of Uniformity) from the parish church, not just that which was motivated by a tender Catholic conscience. But the sarcastic Richard Verstegan pointedly observed that the secular courts’ use of the recusancy statutes was very selective. If someone should be presented for recusancy but it was alleged in his defence that he is a ‘good fellow’ who will ‘fight, and brawl, sweare, and stare, and folow queanes’ with the best, ‘no

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24 Haigh, ‘From Monopoly’, 139.

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pursuevante in Ingland would ever lay handes on such a man for a recus-
ant’. The state was not concerned only, or even mainly, with the mere
technical details of whether a man had dutifully presented himself at his
parish church a certain number of times in the month or year. It wanted
to know why certain people were signalling their religious and political
dissent in this way. It then punished them accordingly in differing degrees.
Technically, recusant nonconformists were all guilty of the same offence
but, as historians are well aware, the state dealt with some much more
severely than others. Likewise, in the parliamentary bills against papistry
in 1571 and 1581, the clauses which made it treasonable to be reconciled
sacramentally to the Church of Rome were drafted so that an indictment
and trial were not confined to establishing whether the accused had been
to confession to a priest who had then absolved him from ‘schism’. The
aim was, rather, to probe whether his withdrawal from conformity to the
Church of England was bound up with a withdrawal of his allegiance
from the queen.

The regime was equally circumspect when it used statute law to
crush the priests who served lay Catholics. The 1585 statute 27 Eliz. I, c.
12 (‘An act against Jesuits, seminary priests and such other like disobed-
ient persons’) made it treason for seminary clergy to return to England
without taking the oath of supremacy. But we have evidence that pro-
ceedings under this act were concerned not just with the fact of the priest’s
presence in England but the wider political opinions of the priest and
whether they justified the regime’s use of that statute against him. In
September 1588, when Thomas Bowyer presented the crown’s case at the
Lewes assizes against four priests indicted under the act of 1585, he made
a speech showing how the ‘Treasons whereof they were to be convicted’
were ‘Treasons by the commen lawes of the Realme’ and ‘the verie same’
as the treason defined in the fourteenth-century legislation of Edward III.
The treasonous essence of the Romish priests’ disobedience was to be
detected not from their return to England but because they came back
in obedience to the pope who was, demonstrably, ‘the Quenes Capitall
enemy’ and who sought to deprive her of her title. The point was under-
lined when two of the four defendants, after being convicted, decided to
conform and save themselves by renouncing papal authority.

King James I took over all the Elizabethan regime’s assumptions
about conformity and Catholicism. In the polemics instigated by James
over whether Catholics should take his new statutory oath of allegiance
(James’s famous pronouncement in 1606 against the papal deposing

26 Richard Verstegan, An Advertisement written to a Secretarie of my L. Treasurers of Ingland (up
[Antwerp?], 1592), p. 44.
28 Unpublished Documents relating to the English Martyrs, ed. John Hungerford Pollen (Catholic
29 PRO, SP 12/217/1, fo. 3r (for which reference I am grateful to Peter Lake); Ward, ‘Law of
Treason’, p. 290.

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power), we see the further evolution of the struggle over conformity which had started in Elizabeth’s reign. James professed to distinguish between moderates and radicals in religion. He would tolerate, he said, the popishly affected moderates, but not the radicals. (Among the radicals he listed lay ‘apostates’ from Protestantism, echoing the Elizabethan statute which associated sacramental reconciliation to Rome with acceptance of the papal deposing power to which James objected.)

When in 1612 the authorities appeared at the house of the recusant family of Gage at Bentley in West Sussex looking for the priest Edward Weston, the reason was not just that Weston was a seminary priest offending by his mere presence in the country against the 1585 statute but because it was known that he had written a manuscript tract attacking the current crop of published books justifying the regime’s enforcement of the new oath of allegiance.

There was, however, within the politics of conformity, a wide range of possible responses open to Catholics, and this supplied a language for them to talk about and define their religion, as well as to negotiate and redefine their relationship with the Protestant state. Absolute recusancy, admittedly relatively rare, was only one of a number of nonconformist positions which a Catholic could adopt. Well-known Catholic families, such as the Constables of Burton Constable, the Stapletons of Carleton, the Cholmlies of Grosmont, and the Trollops of Thornley, to take just a few northern examples, displayed their resistance to the Act of Uniformity through separatism (thus denying essential aspects of the legitimacy of the Elizabethan regime). But they also from time to time went through a show of limited conformity to demonstrate that they were sufficiently within the political pale to merit toleration.

In other words, the issue for us is not so much how many people after the Reformation continued to signal conservative opinions about religion by refusing to conform, though a whole raft of county studies in which a premium was put on counting up such cases in church court detection books often gives that impression. It is how Catholics’ expressions of what they thought ‘true religion’ was, particularly in the light of the state’s increasingly harsh treatment of them, shifted the boundaries of what Catholicism in England meant. We can now use this perception of resistance and conformity to sketch out a brief ‘post-revisionist’ narrative of English Catholicism after 1558.

II

If, as we have seen, Catholicism’s contestation of state-imposed conformity could mean rather more than just preserving the medieval past, how,

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31 Archives of the Archdiocese of Westminster, Series A [hereafter AAW, A], xi, no. 122.
then, do we go about tracing the way in which Catholicism evolved and developed between 1559 and 1640? On the one hand, Catholics such as the Northamptonshire gentleman Sir Thomas Tresham were generally reluctant to commit to paper their real thoughts on how their nonconformity reflected their opinions about church and state, and such things as sovereignty, divine right and popular consent. On the other hand, it is misleading to confine the topic to the gentry. Recent studies, notably by David Underdown and Mark Stoyle, have traced how popular political allegiance (in which ‘commoners’ were not ‘mere unthinking pawns’) was distributed during the Civil War and how pre-war political agendas, notably religion, were reflected in that allegiance. Of course, sixteenth-century Catholics were never confronted with a civil war, as, conceivably, they might well have been over the succession, so the opinions of the majority of Catholics were never similarly recorded. In fact, historians of pre-Civil War Catholicism are, unfortunately, deprived of many of the sorts of research material to which scholars of the established church routinely turn in order to tease out and interpret the political resonances of the religion of contemporary English Protestants. To write a full account of post-Reformation English Catholicism up to 1640 would thus be a difficult task. Yet, for the purpose of this article, we can turn to one aspect of the topic where the historian of Catholicism is as well served as his or her establishment counterpart, namely in the survival of evidence about the clergy. An important key to the relationship between the state and Catholic dissent does lie among the (technically not very numerous) seminary priests who returned from their colleges on the continent to supply the spiritual needs of English Catholics. The existence of a separated Romish clergy, and the affront to the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity which this constituted, were central to the definition and practice of Catholic conformity and nonconformity. The outwardly unpromising records of the priests, their meddling with people’s spiritual allegiances, the often sugary narratives of their persecution and martyrdom, and the apparently petty quarrelsome polemics of their books and letters in which they say how Catholicism might be restored in England, are an index to the way in which recusant and occasional conformist dissent, indeed all the practices in this period which are called Catholic, might be politically and ideologically active.

33 Arnold Pritchard, Catholic Loyalism (1979) [hereafter Pritchard, Catholic Loyalism], p. 50.
35 The occasional interrogation of a suspect who turned informer, such as the Middlesex minister Ralph Betham, who betrayed the system of Catholic houses and priests in Oxfordshire and the Home Counties in 1585, sometimes reveals the political nexuses within papistry; PRO, SP 12/168/25, ii.
An uncritical reading of, for example, the printed tracts written by the Appellant priests does, initially, suggest that the sole purpose of the seminarist Catholic clergy was to serve a quiet Catholic constituency which had existed continuously long before the arrival of Jesuits, plotters and politicians. Humphrey Ely claimed that the restoration of Catholicism commenced in Mary’s reign without the aid of the pernicious Society of Jesus. He himself had been persuaded to Catholicism in Oxford when the name of the society was scarcely heard of there.37 Most of the priests, he said, in their encouragement of their penitents to abstain from the prayer-book services, were merely preserving the old religion.38

But, however much the priests may have admired the people’s affection for pre-Reformation Catholic customs, the aspiration and purpose of the first seminary phase of English Romanism, on the evidence of its attitude to conformity, was one of radical change, not staid continuity. The priests called Catholicism ‘the old religion’, but when they returned in the 1570s from the seminaries, what they encountered was, of course, the complete disestablishment of most central concepts of Catholicism. Here, then, it was not surprising that seminarist Catholicism entered what may fairly be called a quasi-‘puritan’ phase. In fact, as John Bossy has perceptively argued, ‘the idea of the missionary priest as conceived by William Allen [for England] was not easily reconcilable with the forms of any ‘established order’.39 Edmund Campion may have announced that he came merely to ‘preach the Gospel’.40 But, as we have seen, the seminary priests inflected all the language of religion and religious division, particularly nonconformity or recusancy, with new, heavily politicized evangelical emphases which were not present before. The entire Campion episode, which saw the Jesuit-led priests confront Marian priests such as Viscount Montague’s chaplain Alban Langdale over the allowability of church papistry as a Catholic practice, was an exercise in redefining conformity, and the extent to which Catholicism could exist within the structure of the established English church at all. The public and political impact of what Campion and Persons did (mediated through unlicensed printed tracts, preaching, public disputation, the circulation of manuscripts, challenges to debate, doggerel verse and so on) was immense, as

37 Humphrey Ely, Certaine Briefe Notes upon a Briefe Apologie (Paris, [1602]), p. 67.
38 It should be noted, though, how literally Christopher Haigh takes the claims of the Appellants who only ‘wished to preserve the traditional structure and customs of the church’: Haigh, ‘Continuity’, 38. Haigh’s own statement that the seminarists were not primarily evangelical activists is itself footnoted with a reference to the anti-Jesuit writer Joseph Berington’s The Memoirs of Gregorio Panzani (Birmingham, 1793); Haigh, ‘Continuity’, 55. And his argument (commonly deployed by anti-Jesuit contemporaries against the Society’s presumed meddling in England) that ‘pastoral provision was inadequate and the spiritual needs of the commons were not met’ is supported in part by a reference to Philip Hughes’s Rome and the Counter-Reformation in England, itself relying upon the dour opponent of the Society Richard Smith and his report to this effect made to Propaganda in 1632; Haigh, ‘From Monopoly’, 146; Hughes, Counter-Reformation, pp. 410–12.
40 Haigh, ‘Continuity’, 56.
the state’s reaction to the Jesuits clearly showed. It cannot be measured, for example, simply by counting the number of gentry households which Campion visited. The Jesuit John Gerard’s deceptively homely account of his clerical career, and his efforts to persuade his penitents not to go to Protestant churches, is shot through with the cataclysmic language of evangelical Christianity. The principal concern of these priests was not to perform the functions of the now vanishing cadre of Marian priests. The early seminarists’ polemic about the sacraments, for example when they denounced those living in a state of schism, those who ‘live in their flesh, & dye in their spirite . . . without faith, without charitie, without church, without altar, without priest, without sacrifice, without God’, expressed not primarily the lamentable lack of Catholic stone altars, roughly removed from parish churches by wicked Protestants, but a radical view of the true church, and of grace, and of a spiritual unity perceived by reference to suffering and political violence.

This was the pitch which was made to those who might separate themselves visibly from the national church. Undoubtedly, some people were recusant before the arrival of the seminarists in their counties. Yet the really significant explosion in numbers of recusants, and, more importantly, the heightening of the significance which the state and its enemies accorded to Catholic separatism, began when the regime started to prosecute dissenters in the wake of the seminarists’ Campionesque evangelizing, i.e. when the state was forced to engage with that rhetoric of separation in tracts such as the Jesuit Robert Persons’s *Brief Discours contayning certayne reasons why Catholiques refuse to goe to Church* of 1580.

Outwardly, the 1580s were a ‘golden age’ of English Catholicism. There was, apparently, a consensus and godly coherence about what the priests were supposed to be doing. Catholic historians have frequently represented this as the norm, and have argued that later disputes among Catholics were a deviation from it. But, in reality, the 1580s were a short period when the dominance of the Society of Jesus’s missionary programme went unquestioned. Future enemies of the Jesuits, such as Margaret Clitherow’s biographer John Mush, sued for entry into the Society. George Birkhead, the future archpriest, entrusted in James I’s reign by his secular clergy colleagues with the task of weeding the Society out of their affairs, enthused in 1584 about the good effects of Robert Persons’s famous spiritual conversion manual, his *Christian*
William Weston SJ enlisted divers secular priests in 1586 as his exorcist assistants in his outrageous revivalist evangelical displays of the power of missionary Catholicism. The Catholic case against the regime floated on a sea of Jesuit-sponsored martyrological print which identified their cause exclusively by pointing to the regime’s hostility to all Catholics equally, a polemical attempt by these Catholic writers to infuse their confrontation with the state and state church into all forms of religious temperament which could in any sense be interpreted as conservative and opposed to the Elizabethan settlement.

In the mid- to late 1580s, however, perhaps because of the decision by William Allen, Robert Persons and others to rely more heavily on Spanish influence and patronage than other exiles thought wise, a Catholic clerical narrative of evangelical common endeavour against heresy gives way to a narrative of internal faction and bitter division, first among the lay exiles, then among the priests. As an informer reported to Sir Francis Walsingham of the Spanish, Welsh and Scottish factions among the Catholics, they ‘wolde if they colde sucke uche others blude’. The secular priests Thomas Bluet and William Watson claimed that the regime’s proscription of Catholicism was understandable in the light of Jesuit politicking. Whereas in the 1580s and early 1590s Catholic martyrological discourses expressed Catholic unity in the face of persecution and Protestant heresy, the accounts of the few martyrdoms of James’s reign are characterized less by horror at the malice of the Protestants and more by rival Catholic factions’ attempts to claim the martyr for themselves against their Catholic opponents. For example, the martyr John Almond’s last dying wish in 1612 was said to be that an English secular priest should be invested with episcopal orders, something which, allegedly, the Jesuits vehemently opposed.

In a way this actually seems to underpin the revisionist account of Romish clerical Catholicism retreating into an introspective gentrified minority culture. Certainly these disputes have been seen as part of a narrow, small-minded and selfish attempt to insulate a series of comfortable Catholic gentry chaplaincies from the rest of English ecclesiastical life. What could these priests have to do with latent popular opposition to the 1559 settlement and Puritan evangelizing? Well, in some ways, probably very little. But the traditional narrative of the Catholic clerical quarrels between c.1580 and 1630 has often been read very narrowly and only as a dispute about jurisdiction. Indeed, historians have given only brief notice to the conflicts between Marians and the seminarists and

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46 Miscellanea IV (CRS iv, 1907), pp. 153, 155.
48 Hide, Consolatorie Epistle, sig. Aiiiiv.
49 PRO, SP 12/203/30, fo. 48v.
50 Thomas Bluet, Important Considerations (np [London], 1601); William Watson, A Decacordon of Ten Quodlibetical Questions (np [London], 1602), p. 236.
51 AAW, A, xi, no. 164.
52 Haigh, ‘From Monopoly’, 142.

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Jesuits over recusancy, the ‘Wisbech Stirs’ of the early and mid-1590s, the Appellant controversy at the turn of the century, and the furious and long-drawn-out campaign by secular priests to persuade Rome to appoint a bishop over the English clergy, and generally to reform Catholicism in England. Scholars have usually rendered them as a small matter of internal self-regulation for the now drastically reduced Catholic minority.

But if one takes the narratives of these dissensions, and places them in the context of the disputed origins of the revival of English Catholicism, the whole picture looks rather different. What we then see in the Catholicism of the 1580s and early 1590s is not so much the end of an indigenous pre-Reformation sacramentalism as the disruption of a Catholic ‘puritan’ experiment with separatism, an experiment in which the language of evangelical fervour, mission, blood, suffering and, above all, martyrdom had, for a short time, coincided with, perhaps been assisted by, the war with Spain.

And yet this experiment was, in the context of the eighty years between Elizabeth’s accession and the Civil War, exceptional and not the norm. In the later 1590s it became clear that the succession to Elizabeth would probably induce some serious changes in the regime’s attitude to Catholic dissent, perhaps even a limited measure of toleration. It was well known that James VI of Scotland was seeking Catholic support for his candidacy. Some of the newly formulated stark certainties in the 1580s about how far the regime’s conformist programme needed to be resisted now became less clear. In the 1590s too, as John Bossy has stressed, an important ideological support for English Catholic oppositionism, namely the French Catholic Holy League with its monarchomach political philosophies, had collapsed. It became certain that the majority of English Catholics would support the Stuart succession, whatever James VI’s personal religious opinions. It was possible now to see English Catholicism as capable of a more settled existence; in other words more like the church as it stood in countries where the regime was Catholic. The extreme rhetoric of religious separatism which had previously informed Catholic nonconformity could no longer so easily supply the model for what English Catholicism should be like. Appellants such as William Watson now said that there was a direct link between the perverted evangelical ideas which some, principally Jesuits, applied to English Catholicism, and the errors in political philosophy which led subjects astray from their natural allegiance to their sovereign Elizabeth. Jesuit rhetoric about the godliness of separation had irresponsibly and wickedly laid an...
unnecessary political gloss on recusancy and church papistry which upset the moderate balance which a Catholic should adopt in his obedience towards the regime while simultaneously insisting on the rights of his conscience in matters of religion. Perhaps this was the thinking of the well-known renegade priest Thomas Bell who, in the early 1590s, quarrelled with Jesuits such as Henry Garnet about the way in which recusancy and occasional conformity should be practised.56 The Catholic clergy who criticized the Jesuits for their (perceived) disloyalty to the new regime after 1603, and who endorsed with varying degrees of enthusiasm James I’s 1606 oath of allegiance, even urging in some cases that their penitents should take it, had, we know, in the 1590s, challenged the strict/Jesuit construction of recusancy. John Clinch, chaplain to the leading Catholic lay supporter of the oath, Roger Widdrington, a client of Lord William Howard, had done precisely this.57

The programme for ecclesiastical reform of English Catholicism advanced by some of these secular priests during James’s reign (and contested by some Jesuits and Benedictines who feared the extension of their Catholic opponents’ power) is the staple element of almost all the Catholic narratives of this period. It does not, of course, describe the experience of all who might be called Catholics. But the many petitions, letters and memoranda which were despatched to Rome to be placed before the eyes of the curial cardinals responsible for English affairs contain a powerful rhetoric about what Catholicism in England was and should be.58 The priests were well aware that, should the legal restraints imposed on Catholicism ever be lifted, those Catholic clerics with the most convincing rhetoric about religion, the state and the people would be best placed to shape that expansion of Catholic influence in their own image and not that of their enemies. As Peter Lake has shown, some English Protestant churchmen in this period found that it was possible to take the minimal requirements, in royal injunctions and ecclesiastical canons, for ceremonial conformity and invest them with a religious significance which went far beyond ‘mere’ conformity.59 So, also, some Catholic clergy now invested their own programme for a right ordering of English Catholicism with a not dissimilar discourse about what true Catholic religion in its English setting was, mainly by discussing how provision for its regulation and edification should be made.

The fundamental claim by the anti-Jesuit coalition of secular priests in the period after the Appellant controversy was that the disgraceful ‘chaos anglicanum’ should be remedied by the grant of episcopal orders

56 Walsham, *Church Papists*, pp. 56–60.

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to a right-thinking member of the secular clergy. This newly appointed bishop would use his powers to bring stability and discipline, and their church would return to its common course of order through this apostolical mode of government. In the formal wording of the secular clergy’s petitions to the cardinal protectors in Rome, this often figures simply as a request for mere administrative reform. But in addition bishops were the ‘ordinarie pastoures of godes churche’, for the holy spirit had delivered the church to their ‘government’. A bishop was needed to strengthen the faithful in England who suffered under a grievous persecution. The number of Catholics in England was increasing. They were in dire need of assistance to resist the ‘spirituall enemies’ of God’s church. If ordinary jurisdiction was requisite for the good of the church in other countries it was needful also for England.

These petitions are heavily informed by a species of gallican ecclesiastical thought, in particular about the essential integrity of hierarchical structures within a national church. At the same time they also inflected a common language about the expression and practice of Catholic faith in England with their own, usually anti-Jesuit, glosses about the way in which God’s church should grow and flourish in England. For example, the Catholic clergy who returned to England from the continental seminaries talked a lot about the ‘conversion of England’. Usually this has been taken to mean persuasion of individuals to hold certain Catholic theological beliefs and to become recusants into the bargain. In view of the small number of Catholic clergy who were available to undertake such persuasions, this has been swiftly written off as a fantasy which necessarily had to be surrendered when it became clear that England was not going to be ‘converted’ in that way. But, the anti-Jesuit secular clergy pointed out, there was more than one way to convert England, just as, in standard theological discourse, conversion had more than one meaning. Obviously, since one of the marks of the true church was that it must continually grow in size, the number of people who might be thought to be embracing or rejecting Catholicism under the influence of divine grace was important, especially in the context of the polemical battle between Protestant and Counter-Reformation Catholic thinkers and divines. But conversion was also a continuous experience of that grace, and necessarily took place within the forum provided by the institutional church. In this sense, it was, arguably, more important to rebuild and edify the structures of the church than to run helter-skelter, as the seculars claimed the Jesuits did, into a mission field without due thought for the structures through which true religion would continue to be experienced and practised by the faithful. In mid-1615 Anthony Champney wrote to Thomas More, the agent for the secular clergy in

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60 AAW, A, xii, no. 254.
61 Ibid., viii, no. 83.
62 Ibid., xii, no. 251.
Rome, that Rome’s refusal to make public its election of the new arch-priest (let alone get round to appointing a bishop) was a scandal, and people in France were amazed that there was so little care had ‘of Ingland . . . especially seeinge without some goverment there is noe probabilitie of any great progress of religione’.63

The Jesuits and their supporters rejected this analysis, of course, and subscribed, as John Bossy has shown, to the concept of England as a virgin ‘mission’ territory where the routine courses and structures of the church were not sufficient to spread the true faith. The Jesuits also proclaimed noisily that they were the principal exponents of purity in religion through a strict uncompromising refusal of the oath of allegiance. Yet, replied their secular clergy enemies, their political extremism, which tarred all Catholic conscientious nonconformity, now needlessly antagonized the regime. Consequently, it threatened the fledgling institutional structure of the renascent English Catholic church at a time when the conversions of people such as the royal chaplain Benjamin Carier, and the public quarrels between anti-Calvinists such as, on the one hand, John Howson and William Laud, and, on the other, their Calvinist rivals such as the Abbot brothers, suggested that there were likely to be fundamental realignments in the regime’s ecclesiastical complexion which Romanists might exploit. This was even more likely to be the case in the light of the regime’s urgent need for a dynastic marriage for the Stuart heir with a Catholic princess, and the influence this must have on the balance of the regime’s relations with Protestant and Catholic princes in Europe.64

In short, this rather neglected ‘internal’ narrative of the faction-fighting of the priests, which fills the pages of the ‘traditional’ Catholic history of the period, may be the basis for a new discussion of what happened to a wider English Catholicism after the Elizabethan restoration of Protestantism in 1559. Obviously, we are not saying that all of the things which might be described as Catholic during this period were transformed lock, stock and barrel into a quasi-puritan Catholic evangelism in the 1580s, or that in James’s reign English Catholics became an offshore adjunct of France’s gallican church, or that residual parochial hankering after pre-Reformation liturgical practices can be located or explained only by reference to the Appellants’ quarrels. In some ways, therefore, it makes sense for Alexandra Walsham to warn against conflating all English Catholicism with the seminarists’ distinctive programmes for clericalizing

63 Ibid., xiv, no. 139.
certain aspects of religion in England which were averse to the Elizabethan settlement. Yet, clearly, even in the rarefied atmosphere of the struggle for supremacy between different Catholic clerical factions, Catholicism was to some significant degree being hammered out and defined for an English setting. Here English Catholicism was not just being turned into an inward-looking, ideologically quiescent, restricted system of inadequately funded seigneurial chaplaincies, even though we may still agree with John Bossy that the frictions between clerks and gentry which had characterized Elizabethan Catholicism in the 1580s and 1590s had ceased when the clerks largely surrendered important aspects of their independence to the will of the gentry. So it is unwise to conflate an undifferentiated ‘popular religion’ with ‘Catholicism’ and proceed to cite the differences between that concept of Catholicism and the religion of the Protestant state, Puritans, Jesuits and gallicans, in order to show that ‘Catholicism’ in England remained both averse to and untouched by Reformation and Counter-Reformation. For this relegates almost everything which contemporaries regarded as flagrantly, immediately and importantly Catholic, described just as tellingly in Protestant anti-popish tracts as in the Catholic literature of separation and defiance, to a small sideshow, where the heat which such controversies generated makes virtually no sense. There undoubtedly was a large constituency in the English church which was neither particularly evangelical nor Protestant, but which to some degree could be seen as more Catholic than anything else. Many Protestants called it ‘popish’. But Catholicism was not just or even principally a conservative nostalgia for the reign of Mary Tudor which stretched seamlessly forward from the early years of Elizabeth’s reign but declined when its conservative cultural context was whittled away by the enforcement of royal injunctions and episcopal visitation articles.

From the perspective of early Stuart Catholicism the history of the Elizabethan Reformation, at least in this respect, looks very different from the model suggested by Christopher Haigh, and, in fact, looks much more like that of John Bossy. The Catholic evangelicalism, or spiritual and political activism, of the 1580s was, as Bossy argued from a nuanced sociological perspective, a fundamentally extraordinary measure, deliberately aimed at severing many continuities with the past. Bossy also made plain that English Catholicism could not be understood as a single entity, ‘neither purely as the Old Religion nor in purely seigneurial terms’. Admittedly, the number of people who could be described as Catholics in 1600 or 1640 was different from the number in 1558, and they were Catholics in a different way. But this cannot be satisfactorily explained merely by referring to the gradual disappearance of the availability in the parishes of a particular kind of sacramental religious

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65 Bossy, ‘Character’.
66 Ibid., 44.
observance. Certainly those whom we know to have been Catholics in this period did not generally explain their Catholicism by reference to such a standard. The real problem with the revisionist account of Catholic continuity and decline is that it is written almost entirely from an early or perhaps mid-Reformation perspective when the fortunes of the Protestant project, riding on a series of potentially short-term political experiments, were far from assured. By the mid-1570s, however, the Elizabethan Protestant state had not collapsed. For the later period, to reiterate that aspects of Protestantism were in some sense unsuccessful and that Catholicism was merely and only conservative, ceases to be interesting, and, worse, prevents the formulation of any explanatory mechanism to say what did happen after that date.

Let us finish, therefore, by quoting a well-known contemporary, though polemical, expression of some of these arguments. Let us return to the famous so-called myth in Robert Persons’s brief history of sixteenth-century English Catholicism, ‘Domestick Difficulties’. Here the crafty Jesuit supposedly cast as villains the Marian priests and lazy survivalist Catholics, contrasted them with vigorous seminarist heroes and thus distorted how Catholicism had actually continued in vigour and strength until some point in the late 1570s or early 1580s, when it started to lose its reliance on Rome.67 Certainly, Persons’s account has grossly polemical overtones, but a contemporary who read it would not have perceived it primarily as a contrast between the Marian church and its seminarist successor (or betrayer). Contemporaries would have seen in it (approvingly or with distaste depending upon their own ecclesiastical likes and dislikes, their preference for one clerical style over another) an evangelical’s attempt to interpret Catholicism in a soteriological map of the church in England and the visible church in general.

Persons referred back to the Marian church to express similar concerns to those which Puritan critics of ‘dumb dogs’ uttered when they questioned the structure of the Elizabethan church.68 Puritans professed to be aghast at the gap between their aspirations for a reformed church and the actual state of the Elizabethan church, particularly the lack of a godly preaching ministry. Persons laments equally that Mary Tudor had not invigorated a more thorough purge of corruption and laziness in the English church during her reign. But the Jesuit is, of course, like the Puritans, expatiating on the evangelical’s favourite topic of the never-ending conflict between the tendency of the visible church to decay and fall away from the faith, and the experience of the true followers of Christ who will always struggle against such tendencies. Immediately he moves to the topics of churchgoing and recusancy, and that there was a contention among the Marians about whether it was right to attend divine

67 Haigh, ‘From Monopoly’, Miscellanea II (CRS ii, 1906), section ii.

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service after the form prescribed in the Book of Common Prayer. On one level, Persons does contrast later Catholic stubbornness with the Marians’ willingness to conform. He also attacks, with considerably more venom, his current Appellant opponents because they were trying to secure the Jesuits’ removal from England, not because they sympathized with long-dead Marian clerics. But the point of Persons’s narrative is not just that Marians were weak. He says that some were weak and some were strong. On the one hand, there were those such as the future Jesuit Thomas Darbyshire, archdeacon of London, who refused to subscribe in 1559. On the other hand, there were those such as John Kennall, archdeacon of Oxford, who did subscribe, and thought Darbyshire ‘a foole’ for following such a strict course. But Kennall, who ‘went his way and kept his livings’ did so with ‘much misery’ and with ‘extreme affliction of conscience’, and was reconciled to the Church of Rome in the end.

For Robert Persons, 1559 saw not so much a loss of nerve on the part of a Catholic establishment as a providential change of the times and a sorting of the sheep from the goats by forcing people to think seriously about what conformity might mean. Taking into account that perhaps a majority of those who joined the Jesuits, including Persons and Campion, had themselves been conformists before they went abroad, and that they made absolutely no attempt to disguise this, but boasted of the favour God showed them by informing their error-strewn consciences through His grace, Persons’s narrative reminds us that aspects of behaviour within the English church which have often been assumed by historians to be mere synonyms for ‘traditional’ sacramental Catholicism (non-communicancy, recusancy and so on) could be inflected very differently by different people at different times.

Perhaps this tells us that the simple alternatives implied in the words ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ have tempted us into too stark distinctions when narrating how Catholicism moved and represented itself between the Reformation and the Civil War. To chart what happened to English Catholicism in this period it is necessary first to identify the imperatives, spiritual and political, which could at various times, with a flagrant Romish character, be asserted in opposition to the perceived will of a Protestant regime (or a regime which often characterized itself by using Protestant objections to the religion and politics of Rome) and at other times could be used to gloss the same Romish character as a coherent and legitimate element of the English polity. Then, by identifying who exploited these imperatives, and in what ways, we may perceive how, as an English Protestant culture was securely established in the church in England, and a former Catholic one largely extinguished, Catholicism, through its capacity for mutation and reinventing itself, remained very much at the centre of English ecclesiastical politics and culture during this period.