

1

Post-Reformation Culture

Once upon a time the people of England were happy Medieval Catholics, visiting their holy wells, attending frequent masses, and deeply respectful of Purgatory and afraid of Hell. Then lustful King Henry forced them to abandon their religion. England was never merry again. Alternatively, once upon a time the people of England were oppressed by corrupt churchmen. They yearned for the liberty of the Gospel. Then, Good King Harry gave them the Protestant nation for which they longed. Neither of these myths is about real people, though our historiographies are still caught up in disputes about which is right. They are the myths created by conflicting parties and creeds in the aftermath of the Reformation.

The sixteenth-century generations caught in the vast social upheaval that changed English religion could not experience it as pious myths and simple histories have portrayed it. For them the story was more individual, more complex, more difficult to tell. When I think of those people, I invite myself to a wedding feast in the late 1570s. There they sit, three generations of family and friends met to celebrate the union that would produce a fourth generation. The eldest participants had been genuinely Medieval Christians, the Reformation coming in their middle age. Their children, born in the 1520s or 1530s, had religious habits formed in the confusing 1540s, only to see them further confused by the wild variations of the 1550s. The marrying couple, remembering only the late 1550s and 1560s, were different again. Ideologically these people should not have been able to speak with one another. Some were inclined to puritanism, despising their neighbors' moderation and their grandparents' Catholicism. Some thought of others as schismatics and heretics. They might not be able to agree on even the form of the wedding, except that it was established by law. But they were all there. They were living as a family and community despite mutually exclusive religious opinions.

This book is about the creation of post-Reformation English culture. It is a history of what the Reformation did, not a history of what it failed to do. As a religious reform it was never fully successful. England never became a godly commonwealth

with a single faith. But the events we call the Reformation, beginning with Henry VIII's rejection of the papacy and ending with the establishment of the Elizabethan Settlement, changed English culture forever. Over the course of three generations the way the English worshiped, did business, governed themselves, and related to their places in the universe underwent a sea change. This book is an effort to explain how that change occurred.

It is an attempt to inject new questions into the discussion of sixteenth-century England, and answer some already on the table. As the historiography now stands, there is broad agreement that, although there were some English people excited about Protestantism in Henry VIII's reign, there was not much popular support for a change. The society portrayed by Eamon Duffy and John Scarisbrick was contentedly, habitually Catholic.¹ The attempts of the reformers to change this seemed, in Christopher Haigh's analysis, to make very slow inroads into that world of habitual Catholicism. And the change came at various points and to various degrees.

This historiography, however, meets another historiographical tradition coming from the other way. Duffy sees mid-Tudor England as more akin to the fifteenth century than the seventeenth. But Patrick Collinson and his students have documented a Protestant culture in operation in the Elizabethan age.

I am asking how a nation of habitual Catholics turned into Protestants. But as this work has progressed, I have become convinced there is another question more important than what theology best describes the beliefs and practices of sixteenth-century English people. For the men and women living through the Reformation the question was more often "What do I do now?" than "What do I believe now?" They were not consulted about their theological opinions by the people who imposed Reformation upon them, but they had to adapt to the changes in order to continue the business of living. English people did not have the option of ignoring the Reformation. It touched them in too many different ways.

Many of those impacts came suddenly and hard. The death of monasticism, the erasure of the culture of purgatory, the war on "superstitious" custom, amounted to the intentional introduction of religious and social amnesia. But as the Crown took the property more was destroyed than purgatory. Power relationships were radically altered, schools and hospitals disappeared, and conceptions of virtue were turned upside down. Communities had to respond to these changes, their responses initiating new political and social realities that altered the culture. Queen Mary's attempts to undo those effects often heightened them, since what had been undone by royal order was now restored by royal order. Until, that is, Parliament permitted Elizabeth to order them undone once more.

Sharp blows followed by prolonged confusion hit English culture like a series of earthquakes. Things slowly fell apart as public commitment and certainty waned. And it was not just the physical apparatus of late Medieval religion that was being dismantled. Intellectual certainty, habits of obedience, the very definitions of virtue

and truth were under attack. Consensus was disappearing in a welter of competing voices that would have made it impossible to return to the Catholic world of the 1520s, even if Mary Tudor had not died when she did. People were learning to doubt, they were forgetting, and many had nothing to remember. The people under 30 in 1559 had spent their childhoods barraged by contradictory religious and political messages, exposed to successive waves of destruction, denunciation, and persecution.

And they had seen a different world. Although some churchwardens rushed to restore their rood lofts and altars and the mass was “up again” in some places by popular demand, those Catholics had seen a world in which priests married, in which worship was in English, in which they had read the Bible in their own tongue. Their shrines were no more, and they showed little interest in monasticism. The genie was out of the bottle of late Medieval religion. Had Mary lived, her Catholic subjects would never have recreated the “merry England” of their grandparents.

The power of corrosive ideas prompted Henry and Mary to burn heretics, but too many had heard and seen the alternatives to simply pretend they did not exist. By the 1550s the English were living in a world which was irretrievably multi-theological.

By 1580 they were living in a world where very few people had clear memories of a time without religious confusion. Traditional, pre-Reformation Catholicism was dying of natural causes by then. To the Elizabethan grandchildren of people who had lived in that world, it was as far away as Camelot and as exotic as Xanadu. It had become history, and, as a time of superstition and ignorance, it was tidied away by Protestant folklore and history.

By the late sixteenth-century England was living in a post-Reformation culture that was distinctly different from that of 1530. Every sort of institution and every person within those institutions had adjusted, one way or another, to the impact of the Reformation, and, as they lived with those adjustments, they found themselves thinking and behaving in new ways.

They had quickly become used to the idea that people had conflicting religious values, and that those values had to be appreciated and avoided if business was to be done. As a dying Catholic usurer said to his neighbors in 1561, “Masters, I cannot tell of what religion you be that be here, nor I care not, for I speak to tell you the truth. . . .”² The truth was greater than individual religion, and the key to life in this world was to cooperate with your neighbors.

In families we can see this in the ways in which family authority was undermined by claims of religious conscience, while family lore was reinvented to stabilize family solidarity. Most of all, families, like other organizations, found that, although they could not pray for one another’s souls, they could see to it that family property, power, and honor were maintained, that family memory was perpetuated. The family unit was being reconstructed and redefined as having a secular history and purpose.

Institutions, if they survived, were going through the same process. Stripped of their “superstitious” functions, some simply died, but most concentrated on those elements of their role in society that all members could accept. Livery companies became increasingly secular organizations, concentrating on policing their trades, reinventing their company histories as they went. They no longer invoked their saint, and they avoided religious actions that were either costly or divisive, concentrating on charity.

Educational institutions passed through the Reformation more quickly than most. Of course the dissolutions killed many grammar schools, which led to the creation of new schools. The Edward VI schools were built directly on the ruins of the monasteries and chantries, as were Repton and many more created by charitable donors. In the universities Reformation could be brutal, and the short tenure of most fellows meant that colleges rapidly changed their ideological spots. The Inns of Court preferred to ignore religion when they could, acting against Catholic members half-heartedly. But in all cases, the nature and self-definition of the community was affected by the Reformation in ways that narrowed interests.

Oddly, this was true of the church, too. The property laws governing benefices and prebends guaranteed that many livings were occupied by men who were not zealous adherents of any theology. Acting as stabilizers, these priest-ministers often served through successive regimes, trimming their habits to fit the times, setting an example of conformity for their parishioners. Even in Cathedrals the prebendaries settled for talking about property management more than theology in order to reduce religious friction.

Property was the great sweetener of the Reformation, and it guaranteed the royal supremacy. One of the least noted but most important impacts of the Reformation was the power over the church and local institutions that passed into lay hands during the dissolutions. The laity emerged victorious and powerful, uninterested in any church that tried to take back their power. For many “How should I live now?” became “How shall I get mine?” And once they had it, they were scarcely enthusiastic about any ecclesiastical establishment that claimed authority over them. Perhaps they were not anti clerical, but they were opposed to clerics who were unwilling to practice apostolic poverty.

The rapid adaptations made by institutions and individuals in the middle years of the century left a virtue deficit. So much energy had been expended on undermining religious authorities, destroying the ecclesiastical institutions, and grasping their property that there was little consensus about positive behavior. The readiest answer was that the good person did not disturb “order.” In the absence of priests and penances, pilgrimages and penitentials, monasteries and sacrificial masses, Elizabethans had to discover new ways of recognizing the Christian life. But there was no consensus among them. They followed alternative paths, crisscrossing

one another, but disagreeing on which authority was supreme. Emphasis fell on the individual conscience, but when and how conscience was to be applied became a vexing question. Should conscience test and possibly reject custom and law? Or were custom and law appropriate guides to the conscience? The English Civil War would test this.

But there was no Elizabethan civil war. Why? Because in all this confusion the Crown only demanded minimal outward conformity, allowing local groups to work out their own *via media*, substituting political loyalty for religious orthodoxy. These local adaptations permitted the conservatives of the north and west to remain yoked to the Puritans of East Anglia in a single state church. Run by local authorities responding to local conditions, these little commonwealths conformed but mitigated or ignored the deviation of their neighbors. Of course, on one level, conformity was not a choice, but the working out of the meaning of conformity was the job of governing groups in institutions. They had the latitude to fit the Reformation to the realities of their institutions. Most chose a conformity that fit local conditions, working with the expectations and aspirations of the people in their communities, while avoiding, as much as possible, external intervention. This meant that institutions responded in ways that best suited the generation in control at a given point.

By the time Elizabeth died a generation was in power that had only the vaguest recollections of Mary's reign, if any, and a lifetime worth of anti-Catholicism. Its members had created their national identity in relation to their great enemy, the Pope, and they lived in a Protestant state whose most important religious demand was *politique* conformity, masking confessional confusion.

The most important element in this world was the possibility of choice. The possibility of conversion, the awareness of alternatives, the idea of vocations grounded in conscience, meant nothing was static anymore. Although the governing classes were deeply concerned with order, the ground of order was the conscience rightly informed. This undermined their willingness to enforce certain sorts of rules, and strengthened their fear of those who refused to obey their consciences. This changed the regulation of behavior, and government's relation to God's law. Magistrates sought to ensure that the community did nothing to insult God's honor, while leaving many sins, previously regulated, to God for punishment. This changed the purpose of government. Now that the two swords were united in the Crown, heresy was no more, and secular order was the primary reason for governance.

In this study there is always a tension between institutional responses and individual choices, as there was in the sixteenth century. No single institution represents or rules an individual. Personal choices are always possible. However, institutions have to be prepared to respond to those choices, and personal choices are brought to the table in consensual processes. Which means that the churchwardens,

justices of the peace, clergy, aldermen, wardens, and masters, who interpreted and carried out policy produced local regimes that reflected their choices and shaped those of their communities.

Grasping at process rather than hunting for belief, this book pays less attention than usual to the noisy minorities. Certainly Puritans and seminary priests are important, but I am attempting to understand how the rest of English society avoided the division inherent in their radical impulses. In some parishes godly ministers excluded most of their parishioners from communion for failure to meet their high standards, complaining of their hardness of heart and ignorance. But the excluded were the majority, and they are the people whose culture I am attempting to understand. They may well have been religious in their way, but their religion was only a part of their way of life. And no matter what individuals chose to believe, they lived in communities and participated in institutions, so that their personal choices overlapped and were circumscribed by their places and roles.

It took three generations for the effects of the Reformation to be assimilated in English institutions. Although it is currently fashionable to talk about the “long Reformation,” this was a moderately short one, whose impact is visible in the reconstruction of English institutions. By the early seventeenth century English people were living in a reconstructed culture that was, to them, clearly Protestant. Perhaps they were not good Protestants, but they knew they were not Catholics, and they related together in ways that used Protestant language. The reconstructed culture was, in most cases, an adaptation of older forms, but it was vastly different because of those adaptations.

Unfortunately, this new culture contained within it seeds of violence. Because the Elizabethan style of religious settlement allowed for vast local differences, the nation was unprepared for the Stuart style of government. The contradictions in values carefully glossed over by Elizabethans came to deeply trouble their children.

This book is the story of how the English, learning to live with religious diversity, reconstructed their culture. It takes the known historical facts and asks how the English culture evolved as the English people found ways to carry on their daily lives in the face of the changes that engulfed them. Not knowing how the story would end, they each learned to be aware of difference, to live with it, to oppose it, to embrace it, but most of all, to get through their lives in a reasonable way.