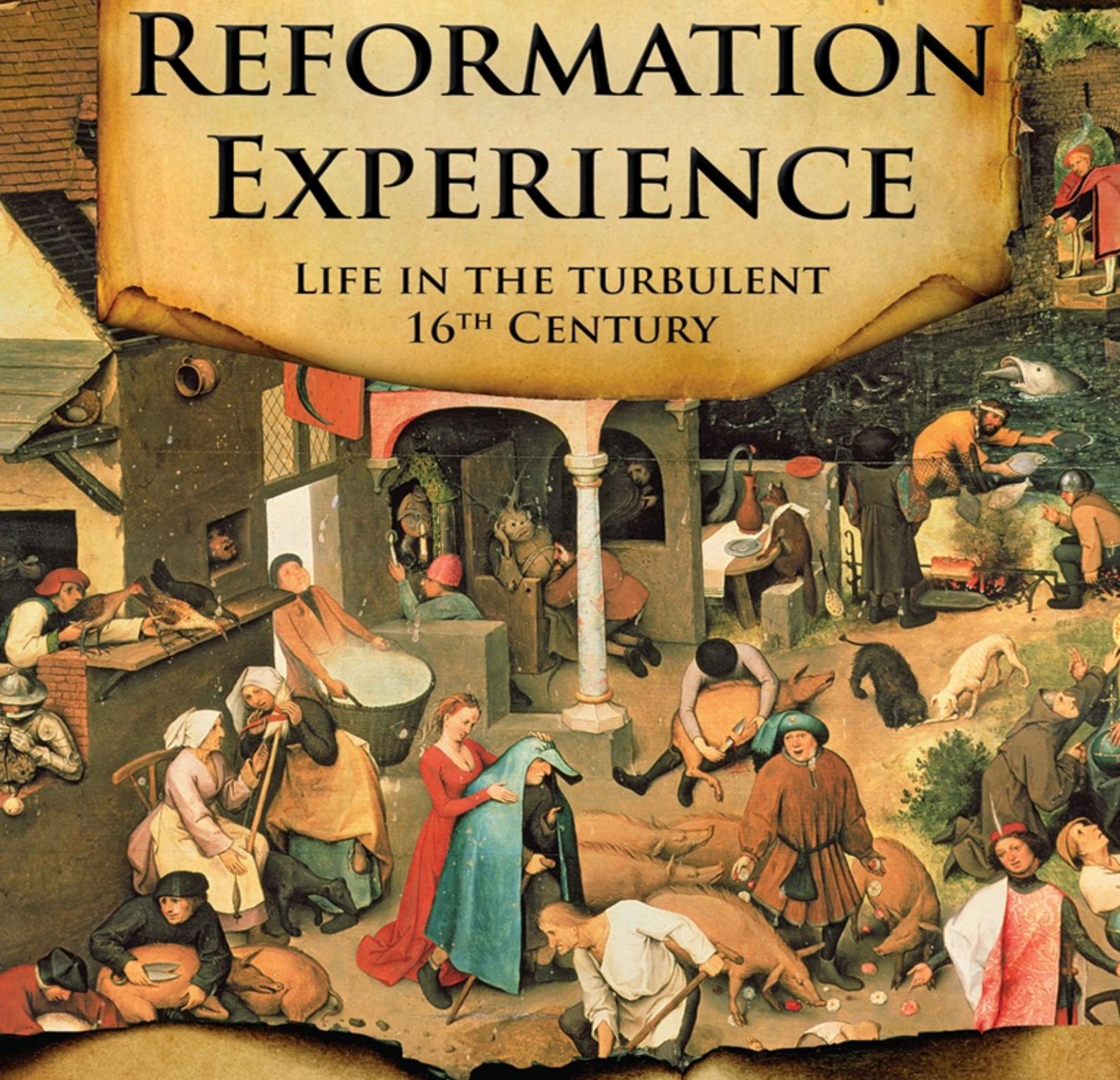


THE REFORMATION EXPERIENCE

LIFE IN THE TURBULENT
16TH CENTURY



ERIC IVES

THE REFORMATION EXPERIENCE

LIVING THROUGH THE TURBULENT 16TH CENTURY

ERIC IVES



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For Susan

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THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

Ask a person in the street about the Reformation and the likely response will be, “What Reformation?” Ask churchgoers and the answer will almost certainly compound misunderstanding and tradition with myth and anachronism. But among historians, Reformation Studies flourish. Indeed, over the last forty years there has been a revolution in scholarship. The old explanations have been consigned to the graveyard of historical invention. The Protestant story of a failing church split apart by the recovery of the original Christian message is no longer credible. Neither is the Roman Catholic story of a church which triumphantly resisted the assault of evil-motivated heretics. And the dismissive view that the whole thing was, in the words of the historian A.L. Rowse, “an idiot controversy” is equally untenable.

Most contributions to this new thinking have been aimed at readers who want or need to study the Reformation in depth, although something has begun to filter down into schools and examination boards. Even so, if given half a chance, students are likely to skirt over the central issue – the massive challenge the Reformation posed to established Western thinking. Instead of ideas they will concentrate on related political, economic, and social issues which are much easier to understand. What is more, such is the postmodern sidelining of belief, that when a student is invited to choose an area of interest for the next essay, the reply is likely to be, “Anything but religion.” Yet sixteenth-century men and women were taught – and most accepted – that religion was central to human experience, so to ignore it is to approach the period half blind.

For a person seeking to understand why the world thinks as it does today, or why religion today is configured as it is, the Reformation is – or should be – of direct and immediate relevance. Key social and political fault-lines too can be traced back to it, and not only in Northern Ireland. For those with Christian beliefs the relevance of the Reformation goes, or should go, without saying. Individual denominations, churches, and religious movements have in significant ways been moulded by the sixteenth century, both positively and negatively. They still are. The shape of Christianity worldwide today is substantially a product of the Reformation. Even where this inheritance has been forgotten, the influence is still there in ideas, attitudes, and assumptions which are taken as normal. This is particularly true of the way the Reformation still shapes vocabulary and language.

Because of this conditioning, new ideas and interpretations are not automatically welcomed. They modify and can even threaten self-identity. A myth is a story which enshrines a meaning, and few people, including those who value religious belief, are happy to have their myths destroyed and their heroes shown to have had feet of clay. Similarly with those who are reluctant to accept that religious rather than secular issues are the core to understanding the event. As for the current inter-church scene, the repeated mantra of the ecumenical movement – “our unhappy divisions” – is

effectively a wish that the Reformation would go away.

Challenging any or all of this may seem foolhardy in the extreme. Nevertheless, this book sets out to tell something of the overall story of the Reformation in the light of recent scholarship. It recognizes that it will not please everybody, especially as it attempts to be as irenic as possible and to be, as far as is feasible, fair to all sides of the story. Not that this account is neutral; it couldn't be. No writer ever is, and certainly not where the Reformation is concerned. Expecting prejudice from a Roman Catholic or a Protestant may seem obvious, but agnostics and atheists also bring their own predispositions. Nor, if it were possible, would the apparently safe path of total neutrality avoid disaster. It is essential to empathize with the passion which is fundamental to the subject. You have to feel why it was vital to burn a heretic or gut a Catholic priest. A value-free Reformation is an impossibility.

The only safe course is to be as objective and fair to the evidence as possible, and to be transparent about one's own position. Thus I write as a Protestant with a background in English evangelical nonconformity; that is the community I instinctively understand. My broader position is that the Reformation was essentially a religious event. Not exclusively – politics, economics, and society explain much of the tragedy – but essentially so. Anything less falsifies. What is more, like any other major religious episode, the Reformation has to be placed in the ongoing context of the wider history of Christianity and Christian belief, and this makes understanding even more difficult. It poses the obscenity of Christians who claimed to be motivated by the love of God killing other Christians who claimed to be motivated by the love of God.

The change that has come over Reformation Studies in the last thirty years has shaped this book in a second respect. Until the last generation or so, the majority of Reformation scholars adopted a top-down perspective. They concentrated on major events, on theological ideas, and the impact of significant individuals. Even though many good studies of local events were undertaken, these tended to take the Reformation as a “given”. Today, historians recognize the need to re-tell the story from the bottom up; that is, how the Reformation came to individuals and communities and what it meant to them. Certainly the story of Reformation theology has to be told. The great ideas do have to be explored; why people think is as important as what they think. Yet the significance of theology is marginal until we ask how new religious ideas reached ordinary man and woman, whether (and why) the ideas were or were not accepted, and how this changed lives.

In this it is vital to remember that the word “religion” covers different things. There is religion as ritual, religion as a set of ideas, and religion as a personal commitment; in other words, we must distinguish between the way churches worshipped, what people were taught to believe, and how belief was – or was not – internalized. For example, in England in 1559, the state imposed a switch from services using the medieval Sarum liturgy to services using the *Book of Common Prayer*. This tells us that ritual changed. It tells us little about what people believed, still less about their spiritual response, and almost nothing about variation between person and person: generalization is perilous. We also face a contradiction which has been at the core of Christianity since the early centuries. Is “a church” comprised exclusively of those who by conviction choose to belong – what is termed “a gathered church” – or does it represent and include the whole of the community? In practice, if

not in theory, much of the West has now embraced the gathered church model. It accepts that a church consists of individuals who choose to attend and decide for themselves the nature and extent of their individual religious commitment. In the sixteenth century, reformers of all complexions certainly wished to promote individual commitment; in particular, some Protestant reformers saw that model as returning to the early Christian church. Yet over the centuries the European church had become a massive and complex structure of interlocking ecclesiastical and political machinery. Its thought patterns dominated both language and philosophy, and the ideas and concepts of society. Of course the sixteenth century does provide plentiful examples of men and women making a spiritual commitment; several thousand, indeed, were willing to die for their beliefs. But the notion that personal conviction was all that mattered cannot account for whole communities ending in one Reformation camp or another. Why England became Protestant and France did not is not adequately explained by counting conversions. Arriving at such community allegiance was a substantially political process which historians have unhappily learned to call “confessionalization”.

Practical considerations also follow from a bottom-up approach. The first is length. Diarmaid MacCulloch’s brilliant *Reformation: Europe’s house divided 1490–1700* (2003) required over 700 pages. This book, therefore, concentrates primarily on England. The Channel was, however, better at keeping out enemies than keeping out ideas, so events elsewhere in the Western church do play an important part, and so too the religious thinking of Luther and others. Space also imposes constraints on period. The book starts with the later Middle Ages, effectively after the Black Death (1348–50), and ends over two centuries later when something like a Protestant England was, it can be argued, beginning to exist.

A further consideration is the right terms to use. Long custom has tied together the words “Reformation” and “Protestant”; for many writers they are synonymous. What, then, should we call reform movements in churches which stayed loyal to the pope? One suggested possibility is “Counter-Reformation”. But that implies that the reform in those churches was essentially a reaction against Protestantism and otherwise might not have occurred. A more positive assessment sees Rome attacking the problems that had given rise to Protestantism, and so prefers the term “Catholic Reformation”. This book, however, contends that the terms “Reformation” and “Counter” or “Catholic Reformation” are seriously misleading. They presume an iron curtain between Protestant and Roman Catholic, but that is only how the Reformation story ended. It did not begin like that. Division had not been inherent from the start, and to think otherwise is a distortion. This book, therefore, presents the story of a single impetus for reform, renewal, and revival in the Western church, which over time was distorted and fragmented by circumstance and personality. Terminology is used accordingly.

These considerations explain the structure of the book. The first section looks at religion in the years before the Reformation, examining the place of church worship and activity in English life, and exploring what Christianity meant at the grass roots. The second section looks at the context and the character of reformation in Europe, looking at the story overall and at some thinkers and theologians known and less well known. The final section tells the story of government pronouncements and local responses in England and what had or had not been achieved by the final quarter of the

sixteenth century. The endnotes principally indicate the sources of quotations used, as well as providing helpful cross-references and explanations additional to the text. Spelling and language has normally been modernized.

In the course of writing this book, I have incurred significant debts. First to Lion Hudson, and particularly my commissioning editors, Kate Kirkpatrick and Alison Hull, for their support and forbearance with a writer who took his time. My academic friends and colleagues Fr Dermot Fenlon, Professor Peter Marshall, and Professor Robert Swanson read all or part of the manuscript and saved me from many errors. Any that remain are not their responsibility. My fellow student Beryl Shepherd provided the equally helpful perspective of a senior public librarian. Many friends, too, by their regularly expressed interest and faith in the project have encouraged me to persevere with a topic which grew steadily more complex, and not least among them, my daughter, to whom the book is dedicated.



LOCATING THE REFORMATION

The most remarkable thing about the Reformation is that it still matters. It began in the early sixteenth century and powerfully influenced the history of Europe until at least the eighteenth, but its consequences are still with us. No one today, observing Ireland or for example Belgium, can have any doubt about that. The Reformation was a Europe-wide phenomenon, but the way religious issues played out was not uniform. Each country or region has its own distinctive reformation. Of nowhere is that more true than England, thanks to the relative isolation guaranteed by the Channel. What, then, was the situation there on the eve of what would be a revolution in thought and behaviour?

The National Context

The key fact about England in the early sixteenth century is best expressed by the paradox that the country was effectively twenty-five times larger than it is today. Consider communications. Instead of today's rapid conveyance of people and goods, and even more ideas, these travelled then at a walking pace. A horse was quicker, but only perhaps twice as fast because forty miles was the maximum distance an animal could reasonably be expected to cover in a 24-hour period and be fit to continue the next day. An accountant who made a routine journey from Bedfordshire to Chester in 1530 took five days for 140 miles. To move letters rapidly along a few key routes, the government maintained a relay of riders to travel at a gallop, but the non-stop record for London to Edinburgh averaged only eleven miles an hour. Only beacons could give a warning of invasion in anything like real time, though districts could be alerted by the ringing of church bells. The effect of this tempo of communications was accentuated by a population of not more than 2,260,000. That gave a density which is equivalent to the current English population having exclusive occupation of 75 per cent of the European Union.

National figures do, however, mislead. The population was not spread uniformly. Three-quarters lived in the lowlands of the south and east where the density could reach 100 per square mile and sometimes more. The high lands of the north and west averaged twenty per square mile or even fewer, and so were nationally less significant. Given the small population, much land was not occupied and a great deal was still wooded. Indeed, the country should be envisaged as almost an archipelago of cultivation in a sea of waste and woodland, provided that we recognize that waste and woodland were vital sources of raw material. The economy also varied. The north and west focused on animal husbandry, the south and east on arable. Within those broad

divisions, climate and soil produced great variation. Ease of access was critical too – for example, it was no use being able to grow grain in quantity if no navigable river was accessible to move such a bulky commodity. Animals, on the other hand, could be moved on drove roads. The only nationally structured industry was the manufacture of cloth, precisely because product could be easily moved on pack animals for export through London. The effect of these local variations was to make England a patchwork of perhaps forty more or less distinct economic regions. Between these regions levels of wealth and income varied widely. Kent, for example, paid fifteen times more tax per acre than Yorkshire. Wealth was also very unevenly distributed within communities. Perhaps 40 per cent of people lived on the margin, supplementing inadequate land with seasonal wages. Only just over 2 per cent came from gentry families or better.

Patterns of society differed from region to region. For example, the south and east of Warwickshire was a countryside of long established compact villages, farming in common, socially stable and hierarchical. Even so there were exceptions. When the accountant on the way to Chester in 1531 reached the Dunsmore near Rugby he had to employ a guide. The north and west of Warwickshire was very different. In the “Forest of Arden” small hamlets were the norm, much less regulated, and peopled by individuals who supplemented the produce of smallholdings in the woodland by nail-making and other metalwork. There was a growing awareness of being English, but the everyday horizon of most men and women was the economic area they lived in. Language was not yet standardized. In 1522 a Cumberland man resident in Kent was accused of being an alien Scot. A foreigner was a person not from my area. Individuals were able to move long distances, more perhaps than one imagines – London was a major destination. They were, however, likely to be from families at least prosperous enough to fund younger sons who had no prospects at home. The other extreme would increasingly be people taking to the road in search of work, because by 1520 the population was beginning to rise. It takes time for a rural economy to increase employment by bringing more land into cultivation, and until then too many people will be chasing too few jobs. Another consequence was that England was a country of young people – 37 per cent in 1556. All this said, it remains the case that the bulk of the population was relatively static and that most people did not migrate beyond parishes near to where they had been born. Few towns interrupted this picture of a largely rural England. In the early sixteenth century only perhaps 6 per cent of the population lived in any sort of urban environment. London was the only genuine city, with a population of perhaps 60,000. Norwich was the next in size – say 12,000 – followed by a handful of regional capitals such as York or Salisbury (possibly 8,000). Many market towns failed to reach four figures and were little more than villages.

England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was, thus, a very diverse country, but it was a national unit nevertheless. What we exaggeratedly call the Wars of the Roses began with the crisis of a ruler who was inadequate and ended with strong rule restored.¹ Government was already substantially centralized at Westminster. The legal systems were sophisticated and consultation mechanisms well established – most notably parliament. The laws it passed applied countrywide, as did any extra taxation it agreed to over and beyond that already enshrined in law. Other factors too affected the country generally. The population rise was the most important. Initially this stimulated the economy but, as well as putting people on the roads, from the early

1520s it began to push up prices. Increased government spending also kicked in, thanks largely to the costs of war and the preparation for war, and the governments of Henry VIII and his son Edward VI made inflation worse by destabilizing the currency.

These factors were national, but given England's wide regional differences the impact would vary considerably. Assuming the principle "one size fits all" was simply unrealistic, a consideration which would prove to be of enduring importance in the English Reformation. So too would another dimension of localism – power. England had no civil service, police force, or standing army, so who could exercise authority? The answer is that everything, from the county down to the parish, depended on the willingness of people with the clout that came from property, wealth, and community status, to support and obey the crown, gentry whom the crown could recruit as magistrates and commissioners, and parish officers chosen by neighbours. The number of such people was, however, limited, as was the effectiveness of sanctions against them. The crown could discipline individuals but not large groups, still less do without the country's "natural rulers". This meant that it was not enough for the crown to order this or that. Whether the order was effective would depend on people in each locality being in a position to enforce it and being willing to do so. Except for London and its immediate hinterland, the king was a distant figure; local considerations were immediate. Royal decisions thus were most effective when they coincided with interest in a community. Conversely, local priorities, bureaucratic lethargy, and lack of enthusiasm were hard to overcome, as was deliberate obstruction.

The Church in England

Strictly speaking, there was at the start of the sixteenth century no English church. There were two separate provinces of the Western church which answered to Rome. In the north, the archbishop of York presided over three dioceses. In the south, the archbishopric of Canterbury covered the fourteen remaining dioceses in England and four in Wales. Each province had its own Convocation [assembly], but Canterbury's was much the more important – it met concurrently with parliament. Dioceses were made up of parishes, some 9,000 in all, but varying greatly in size. In the populous south the average was four square miles or less; in the wilds of Lancashire it was thirty-three. Taken overall, the English church was wealthy. Enquiries carried out in 1535 suggest that the church owned a fifth or more of the nation's estate, giving it perhaps £400,000 a year, and that at a time when the crown struggled to raise £100,000. That is as Henry VIII saw it, but the comparison is somewhat unfair because it aggregates the incomes of thousands of individual recipients. These varied enormously. Some bishops and senior clergy enjoyed receipts on a par with the aristocracy. A minority of parish priests were comfortably off, or held more than one benefice. The majority did much less well. In 1535, one in ten of parish priests in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield was supposed to exist on less than £5 a year, the wage of a farm labourer. Moreover, only a fortunate minority of ordained priests actually had the security of even a modest benefice. The rest of the 30,000 or so might be employed on a meagre salary to assist in a parish and/or live by conducting casual services (which also could boost an incumbent's income).

Most clerics, from parish dogsbody to the majority of bishops, were known as "seculars" because they lived and worked in the community [Latin *saeculum* = world].

A much smaller category – around 10,000 – lived in monasteries and similar restricted communities. They were known as “the religious” and as “regulars” because they followed a prescribed *regula* or rule of life and conduct. There were some 800 or so of these communities. Only perhaps 150 were for women, housing maybe 1,000 nuns. Again there was uneven distribution. The province of York had fewer than 100 houses for men and 29 for women. The rest were in the south. Of the regulars, two-thirds were monks and their principal contribution to the religious life of English men and women was continued prayer. Nuns did the same. The remainder of the regulars (say 2,500) were friars, whose houses were normally located in towns. Their prime role was pastoral work in the community.

Together, religious houses accounted for perhaps half of the total wealth of the church but there were again wide variations. Nearly one in ten (many of them friaries) had an annual income of less than £20 but the wealthiest monastery, Westminster Abbey, enjoyed nearly £4,000 a year. Indeed, of the total wealth of the religious houses, 25 per cent went to twenty-three monasteries in receipt of £1,000 plus. Again there was the north–south divide. Only three of the wealthiest abbeys were in the province of York. The number of brothers in the various monasteries differed widely too. Twelve monks was the minimum needed to ensure observance of “the rule”. Some houses had three and even four times that number, but they were a minority. Some houses had fewer than ten monks. As for nunneries, most were tiny. It is, however, wrong to think of houses only in terms of the religious occupants. Except for the very smallest, they were units, sometimes significant units, in the secular economy, both locally and through their more distant estates, which in some cases were spread over several counties. The monks generally had ceased farming directly, so the nearest their distant tenants got to them was the steward or bailiff appointed to manage the properties – normally local gentlemen and yeomen. There was, of course, also a domestic staff – cooks, grooms, and the like – to cater and care, and not just for the religious. Monasteries served travellers; some educated boys and (in a limited number of cases) housed retired lay folk who had purchased a “corrody” – in effect, care and accommodation for life. Another feature of late medieval monasteries was that, in most, abbots had withdrawn from the common life into purpose-built lodgings with a large staff where they lived as one of the local gentry.

The church had its own judicial system – canon law – and its own courts. These not only regulated the behaviour of the clergy and punished all crimes committed by them but had a wide jurisdiction affecting laypeople too. Many areas of disputes with the laity came under church law – for example over the payment of tithe. Then there were moral offences, most commonly sexual misbehaviour. Church courts also had jurisdiction over borderline religious areas such as marriage, defamation, wills, and testaments. The authority of England’s archbishops and bishops was perhaps more effective than royal authority since their dioceses did have local bureaucracies. They personally were substantially involved in royal service, but were able to leave their religious responsibilities to professionals who by and large ran the church machine well. But, that said, bishops were in practice not the independent authorities they were in theory, which made for difficulty when, as was not unusual, one of them sought to raise the standards and performance of his clergy. Dioceses were peppered with “peculiar”. These were parishes or groups of parishes exempt from the authority of

the local bishop, some answerable to authority outside the diocese, some directly to the pope, some to no authority at all. Significant numbers of the regulars were outside episcopal control, including the friars and the occupants of over a hundred monasteries. There were other forms of exemption too – for example from the archdeacon (the next figure below the bishop) – and even cases where an archdeacon was effectively free of the control of his bishop. What is more, although the diocesan supposedly had the right to ordain his clergy, he did not have control over parish appointments. This was generally in other hands – those of nobles and gentlemen or monastic houses. Hence, even if the bishop did discipline an incumbent, there was no certainty that the successor would be any different. Bishops had a further area of concern too. A diocese was an integral part of the society of its area. The bishop was a local magnate, with all that meant in terms of networking and patronage. These could bring him positive support but equally could undermine him, depending on whether his policies were or were not popular. And, when the Reformation came, that would go for his ideas as well.

THE ENGLISH AT CHURCH 1500

On any Sunday in the early sixteenth century, the parishioners of All Saints North Street in the city of York would be found wending their way to their parish church as they had done for generations. In the rest of England's parishes and in the local chapels in remote areas, their fellow countrymen and women were doing the same. The population of All Saints North Street was small, but the building measured only twenty-nine metres by fourteen (ninety-five feet by forty-six feet) and even that area was not all free space.¹ The eastern ends of the two side aisles were partitioned off to make at least four chapels while, as in all churches, a tall screen – solid to waist high with open arches above – divided the central section into a chancel to the east – the preserve of the parish priest – and the nave to the west, which accommodated the parish. Worshippers thus faced congestion as they entered by the south-west door, a crush only tolerable because private pews were only just coming into fashion and the custom for the majority was to stand or kneel.

Across the top of the screen ran the “rood beam”, a substantial timber which supported the “rood”, a large statue of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, flanked by images of his mother, the Virgin Mary, and his closest friend, St John. In some buildings the beam supported a platform [the “rood loft”], on which the figures stood along with votive lights and possibly a small altar too. Where a church had a chancel arch above the rood, the space [“tympanum”] might be filled with a so-called “doom”, a graphic painting of the Last Judgement which showed souls being conducted to heaven or dragged down into hell. Beyond the rood screen the focus of the chancel was the high altar – raised against the east wall and topped with a stone altar slab incised with five crosses to mark its consecration. It was flanked by two statues, one certainly a statue of the Virgin, and in All Saints a further statue of Mary stood beside the altar in a side chapel dedicated to her (“the Lady Chapel”). The other side chapels had their statues too – St Nicholas, St Katherine, St Thomas, and St James. The windows of the church were also crowded with appropriate sacred images. The windows of the Lady Chapel emphasized the story of the Virgin, and the window lighting the chantry of St Thomas showed Christ between the Apostle Thomas and St Thomas Becket.

The Sunday Service: The Priest

Sunday began with the presentation of the holy loaf. This was baked by households in turn and the provider processed to the high altar, recited a special prayer, and presented the priest with a candle. Then came matins, a service of series of readings

and prayers, followed by the main event of the day, parochial high mass. For this, the clergy put on elaborate vestments over the “albs” [sleeved tunics] they wore every day. Once robed, the priests consecrated holy water and processed round the church, sprinkling both the altars and the congregation. Next they passed through the rood screen into the chancel, accompanied by various assistants carrying the processional cross, a sacring bell, and an incense burner.²

At the altar steps the service began with the clergy following elaborate texts and rubrics which specified every gesture and movement. The laity could undoubtedly smell the incense, but because of the intervening rood screen would see very little of the priest going through the opening ritual and in any case he did so facing east, i.e. with his back to them. Eventually he placed a round wheaten wafer on the communion plate or paten and poured wine into a communion goblet or chalice. Nor could much be understood of what the priest was saying; a good deal was deliberately repeated so as not to be heard and in any case (as with all church pre-Reformation liturgies), everything was in Latin.

Sunday Services: The People

While the clergy in the chancel were engaged in the liturgy, the laity was expected to engage in private devotions, such as reciting the Creed, which they were required to learn in Latin [*“Credo in unum Deum”* – “I believe in one God”]. If they had also learned the words of the Latin *Gloria* [*“Gloria in excelsis Deo”* – “Glory to God in the highest”], the *Benedictus* [“Blessed is he who comes”], and the *Agnus Dei* [“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us”] they could say or sing them at the right places along with the priest. Also, by the sixteenth century, literate laity who could afford it might have a printed guide to the liturgy of the mass and private prayers to say at appropriate points, each accompanied with a Latin *Paternoster* [“Our Father who art in heaven”] and an *Ave Maria* [“Hail Mary”]. The less wealthy and those who could not read were expected to repeat prayers from memory or else say the “Our Lady’s Psalter” – 150 repetitions of the *Ave Maria*, counted off on a string of beads in groups of fifteen separated by saying a *Paternoster*.³

Thus far the parish mass was a ceremony which the laity observed, not a service they took part in, but then the Latin Gospel Book would be ceremoniously brought from the chancel through the screen and held up for a cleric and none but a cleric to read. Then the priest would enter the pulpit to deliver a sermon. He would first repeat a text from the reading, translate it into English, and preach on it. How frequently sermons were delivered is hard to say. They were popular and every parish was supposed to have one every quarter. However, plague all too frequently caused interruptions, and only a minority of clergy had a licence to preach or the education to do so. Nevertheless, for the conscientious village priest who could cope with Latin but had no licence, printed helps were coming on the market. Town churches such as All Saints North Street and the other churches of York were probably better placed, because of the city’s four friaries. Friars saw preaching as a main part of their vocation.

After the sermon (if there was one) the parish priest proceeded to “bid the bedes”,

a term derived from the Anglo-Saxon word for prayer. In the first part, the priest, speaking English, called on the people to pray for the pope and the clergy, especially those from the parish, for the king and persons in authority, for those in special need such as pregnant women, and for the family which had donated the holy loaf. Then he led prayers for the dead, especially recently deceased parishioners, and, depending on the length, recited all or part of the “bede roll”, a list of past benefactors of the church.

With the bidding of the bedes completed, the priest returned to the chancel for the climax of the mass, the consecration of the wafer and the wine. This was announced to everyone by ringing the sacring bell. The priest repeated the words Christ had used at the Last Supper – “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*” [“for this is my body”] – and raised [“elevated”] the newly consecrated wafer [or “host”] high above his head for everyone to see. So too the chalice: “*Hoc est enim calyx sanguinis mei*” [“for this is the cup of my blood”]. Everyone was expected to reverence the consecrated host, and in order that people could get a glimpse of the elevation, special holes [“squints”] were provided through many rood screens. Then came the communion, when the wafer or host was eaten and the wine drunk, after which the mass ended with prayers. Only priests consumed both bread and wine – what was called “communion in both kinds”. The laity were entitled to the wafer but they normally took communion only once a year at Easter or when they were dying (part of the “sacrament of extreme unction”). The nearest parishioners came to the communion at the regular Sunday mass was kissing the paxbread, a disk or board (with a sacred picture on it). The priest took this just before he consumed the consecrated elements, kissed both the cloth on which the host rested and the lip of the chalice and then kissed the paxbread, and this was taken to the parishioners to be kissed by each in turn. The mass then ended with prayer and a Gospel reading after which the loaf presented at matins was brought out, solemnly blessed, cut up, and distributed to the laity. Though an ordinary loaf, it obviously paralleled the host and, indeed, it was supposed to be the first food eaten that day.

The end of the parish high mass was not the end of the Sunday services. Masses had still to be said at each of the four or five side chapels or chantries – so named for the services chanted there. These were “low” masses without the special interruptions in the parish mass, and several could be said at the same time. Later in the day private services would be held but parishioners were again supposed to attend for evensong, which comprised Latin readings and prayers with no special lay participation.

Other Services

On the great festivals of the Christian year and on major feast days, the ceremony would be much more elaborate, particularly on the festival of the saint the church was named after; at All Saints that was 1 November. The festivals of saints to whom chantries were dedicated would also be marked. On 2 February the Commemoration of the Purification of the Virgin Mary was celebrated by a procession in the church and churchyard when everyone was supposed to take part and be given a blessed candle to protect their homes from thunderstorms. Another parish procession was held on the feast of Corpus Christi in late May or June. At Rogationtide (which fell in November) parishioners were expected to process on three successive days. The greatest season of the church year was Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. On Palm Sunday there was a procession and elaborate ceremonial and on Good Friday a consecrated host was

“buried” in a symbolic tomb beside the high altar and was “raised to life” with great rejoicing on Easter Sunday to mirror the burial and resurrection of Christ.

Activity at All Saints was, however, not confined to Sundays and holy days. Where an early Tudor church had sufficient clergy it might be in almost continuous use. Each day there was a dawn or “morrow mass” for servants and workers, followed by a parish mass at the high altar and masses in each of the chantry chapels. Then there was a steady demand for particular services. There were marriages – “spousals” – children to baptize – no later than a week after birth – and mothers to “purify” or “church” – a month after delivery. The dead had to be buried and this would mean setting up the parish hearse [staging] in the church to support the coffin and saying “The Office for the Dead”, part one of the funeral liturgy. Overnight a vigil would be kept and the next day the second part of the liturgy, and then the corpse was buried. In many cases, further commemorations of the deceased would take place over succeeding weeks or even years.

What this weekday activity could amount to can be gleaned from Scarborough, another Yorkshire town, two generations earlier.⁴ The parish church there was holding at least one of these ceremonies (and frequently more) on 123 weekdays, and that does not include perhaps more than sixty baptisms – plus six special occasions for local guilds. There would also be occasional offices, for example a mass said for a traveller passing through.⁵ Certain inns, indeed, maintained a licensed chapel to provide a morning mass for the guests. It is also the case that some parishes had subsidiary chapels where the liturgy was celebrated.⁶

Outside the Parishes

As well as the work of the secular parochial clergy, further religious provision came from the regulars. Initially these “houses of religion” had been endowed by wealthy individuals to intercede for themselves, their families, and other benefactors. Monks and nuns offered prayer communally at specified times on a 24-hour cycle [“the office”] in the chancel of the monastic church. By 1500 new foundations were rare. Instead, as we shall see, individuals purchased particular prayer packages for themselves or for deceased relatives, friends, and patrons. As for the friars, in addition to preaching, they heard confessions and augmented the work of the parishes. They were also prominent at the universities (Oxford and Cambridge) and they taught children.

One dimension of pre-Reformation Christianity which in the past has been significantly underplayed by Reformation scholars is what can be termed “voluntary religion”. A minimum pattern of observance was required from all parishioners, but beyond that parishes offered scope for much variety and diversity. Pilgrimages, private masses, indulgences, names on the bede roll – none of this was regimented. The most significant example of this was a voluntary religious association under the patronage of a particular saint, variously known as a guild, brotherhood, or fraternity. These were lay controlled – which helps to explain their attraction – and varied from humble rural ones to large and wealthy organizations with significant property and members who were aristocrats. Fraternities were hugely important and hugely popular; they were everywhere – nationwide possibly as many as 30,000. Small villages might have just