Introduction

There is no such thing as ‘the English Reformation’. A ‘Reformation’ is a composite event which is only made visible by being framed the right way. It is like a ‘war’: a label we put onto a particular set of events, while we decide that other – equally violent – acts are not part of that or of any ‘war’. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English people knew that they were living through an age of religious upheaval, but they did not know that it was ‘the English Reformation’, any more than the soldiers at the battle of Agincourt knew that they were fighting in ‘the Hundred Years’ War’.

It is easy enough to sum up the bare outline of the events we call ‘the English Reformation’. It is a story unavoidably dominated by successive kings and queens. During the reign of Henry VIII (1509-47), England broke away from the Papacy and embraced some aspects of the Protestant Reformation that was unfolding on the Continent. During the short reign of his son Edward VI (1547-53), the country moved in a much more decisively Protestant direction. That was promptly reversed by the Catholic restoration under Queen Mary (1553-58), which was itself overturned by a Protestant restoration under Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603). Not least because of Elizabeth’s longevity, her idiosyncratic Protestant ‘settlement’ stuck. Versions of it were maintained by her successors James I (1603-25) and Charles I (1625-49) – at least until civil war swept King Charles from power, cost him his head, and pitched England’s religious life into turmoil once again.

But what does this story mean? Plainly these religious upheavals permanently changed England and, by extension, the many other countries on which English culture has made its mark. There is not, however, a single master narrative of all this turmoil. How could there be? It was played out at every level of an increasingly diverse society, as highly visible political changes and shifts in public religion shaped, and were shaped by, the lives of millions of people. The way you choose to tell the story is governed by what you think is

important and what is trivial, by whether there are heroes or villains you want to celebrate or condemn, and by the legacies and lessons which you think matter. Once you have chosen your frame, it will give you the story you want.

So this book does not tell ‘the story’ of ‘the English Reformation’. It tells the stories of six English Reformations, or rather six stories of religious change in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. The stories are parallel and overlapping, but each has a somewhat different chronological frame, cast of characters and set of pivotal events, and has left a different legacy.

Which, if any, of these stories is true? ‘Truth’ is a gold standard. Historians prefer to deal in ‘facts’, a paper currency whose value is always open to question. Certainly none of these stories is the whole truth. They are, rather, as close to tolerably accurate as this historian’s craft can make it. Which of them you prefer is up to you. As for me, I hope I have not made my own preferences are not too plain: apart from my enduring dislike of foisting our own narratives onto people who cannot now gainsay us but were once as passionate, intelligent, foolish, ignorant and alive as we are.

I. Catholic Reformation

Christianity first came to the country we now call England in Roman times. In the sixteenth century, the age of the Reformation, not everyone believed the legend that Joseph of Arimathea had brought the Gospel to Britannia in the first century, and planted a thorn on Glastonbury Tor; but the equally legendary tale of how Pope Eleutherius had converted King Lucius of the Britons to Christianity in the second century was common knowledge. Moreover, Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, was claimed as an honorary Briton on the basis that he had begun his reign in York. Still, all this was only prelude. The collapse of Roman rule and a wave of pagan, Anglo-Saxon settlement in the fifth century pushed Romano-British Christianity to the island's western fringes, and above all to Ireland. The incomers had to be converted afresh. In the year 597 a far from legendary missionary named Augustine, sent by the equally real Pope Gregory the Great, persuaded King Ethelbert of Kent that he and his kingdom ought to become Christian. Augustine became England's first archbishop at Canterbury, Ethelbert's capital, and – aside from a fifteen-year gap in the mid-seventeenth century – his successors down to the present have sat on his throne.

Sixteenth-century English Christians could therefore look back on nearly a millennium of unbroken history. And whether they thanked Eleutherius or Gregory, they could take particular pride in being the first nation to be converted at the hands of a Pope. For a country at almost the farthest edge of Christendom, this connection to the Apostolic See of Rome was a point of pride. A cynic might say that it cost England very little to be ostentatiously loyal to the Pope, since Rome was too far away to make too much of a nuisance of itself – but equally, this meant that England's voice was underrepresented in the Church's councils. There has as yet only been single English pope (Adrian IV, 1154-9), although as we will see, in the sixteenth century there were a couple of near-misses. Nevertheless, a strong Anglo-papal axis was a recurring fact of medieval English life. Duke

William of Normandy legitimised his conquest of England in 1066 with a papal endorsement. King Henry II was made lord of Ireland by a grant of that sole English pope in 1155. King John, the closest thing medieval England had to an antipapal ruler, had by the end of his reign reversed his position so dramatically that he formally granted sovereignty over the entire realm to Pope Innocent III. During the great schism of 1378-1417, England was stoutly loyal to the popes in Rome, rejecting the rival claimants in Avignon. In 1485, Pope Innocent VIII gave the newly and precariously crowned Henry VII a much-needed endorsement by accepting his tenuous claims to the English throne and permitting him to marry his royal cousin Elizabeth of York. King Henry, an invariably sharp-eyed propagandist, had the papal bull translated into English and printed for general circulation: it ran to at least four editions. The logic was the same as it had been for centuries. Kings and popes both had far more to gain from working together than they could ever win from confrontation.

This long history has helped to foster the myth of the Middle Ages as an undifferentiated 'Age of Faith', whether depicted as an Eden of Catholic innocence or as a thousand years of Babylonian captivity. Of course this is not so. Neither in England nor elsewhere in Europe could Catholic Christendom flourish as it did for so long by remaining static. The Catholic world's astonishing durability testifies to its power of reinvention. Throughout the Middle Ages, established patterns of religious life were challenged by movements of 'reform' – some consciously led from Rome, but many more bubbling up as local initiatives, often in the form of new or reformed orders of monks, nuns, friars or canons. The Church's hierarchy suppressed or even persecuted initiatives which posed an unacceptable challenge, but it much preferred, where it could, to tolerate, tame or co-opt them. They were its engine of renewal.

If there was a single pattern to these myriad reforming initiatives, it was a spiral, widening on each turn. Medieval reform was a recurring cycle in which formality, laxity,

habit and corruption was periodically challenged by new or revived movements of invigorated discipline and holiness. For example, in the early thirteenth century the Franciscan friars brought a newly austere approach to the discipline of poverty. They then settled into less rigorous patterns of living, only to be challenged afresh from within their own ranks by a so-called 'Observant' movement which sprang up to oppose this laxity, and which was formalised in the fifteenth century. Henry VII, with his sharp eye for branding opportunities, made himself patron of a new English province of the Observants.

With each turn of this cycle of holiness and laxity, the circle widened from the clerical and monastic elite to the population at large. The Franciscans, unlike their monastic predecessors, set out to live amongst and minister to the common people. Some fourteenth- and fifteenth-century innovations abandoned formal religious orders altogether, allowing lay men and women to live in quasi-monastic communities, sometimes only temporarily rather than as a life-long vocation. The slow spread of literacy, accelerated by the development of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, symbolised a change in how lay Christians related to their Church. No longer simply the passive consumers of its sacramental services and the subjects of its prayers, they were participating. Books of hours, written so that lay people could pray as monks did within the fabric of their everyday lives, became a staple of the late medieval book trade.

So the English church in the early sixteenth century was hungry for reform, but that was neither an unusual nor an alarming condition. Loyal and earnestly pious churchmen were painfully aware that the English Church fell short of its high ideals – even though, compared realistically both to its own past and to the rest of Latin Christendom, it was in pretty good shape. Its clergy were better disciplined and educated, and its parishes better equipped, than ever before. Its lay people – many of them – were hungry to be brought deeper into the Church's life, and it was being done. The plainest sign of success in England was that a

dissident movement offering more radical lay empowerment, the diffuse sect known as the 'Lollards', had not gained much traction following its brief flowering in the late fourteenth century.

But for the Church's most ambitious leaders, 'good enough' was not good enough, and modest successes only underlined how much more there was to be done. By the early sixteenth century, this longstanding unease was merging with a new movement for reform that was sweeping Christendom and which put down particularly deep roots in England. 'Christian humanism', as historians call it, was the latest turn of the medieval spiral of reform: an attempt to apply the methods and insights of the Renaissance to religious life. Its most important prophet, the sharp-tongued, peripatetic Dutch monk Desiderius Erasmus, spent some years in England and inspired a generation of English scholars. His closest English friend, Thomas More, won a continent-wide reputation in his own right. Fittingly enough, More was a layman, not a priest, and his teasing vision of an ideal society in *Utopia* (1516) summed up the Christian humanists' dreams. In this imagined land, the actual priests were very few and very holy, but the entire population lived in such simplicity and purity that the island of Utopia amounted to a giant monastery. They prized learning, justice and charity over rites and superstitions. In Utopia, the spiral of reform had reached its end, and had included everyone. The book's opening chapters made explicit the contrast with More's home island, where the rich and powerful claimed to be Christian but had forgotten peace, mercy and the needs of the poor.

Utopia was a satire, but the Christian humanists did more than offer impossible counsels of perfection from the sidelines. More himself reluctantly entered King Henry VIII's service, and paid dearly for it. Another far more compromised but far more powerful reformer was already pressing this agenda forward. Cardinal-Archbishop Thomas Wolsey, whose administrative omnicompetence made him effective ruler of England on Henry VIII's

behalf from c. 1514-29, has been remembered more for ambition and corruption rather than for reform and idealism. Yet this is a man who turned a narcissistic, warmongering king's diplomatic difficulties into a hard-nosed scheme for universal, perpetual peace between the European powers, with England and the Papacy acting as the guarantors. The failure of this impossible project is hardly surprising. What is astonishing is that Wolsey secured such wide international agreement to it, and that for a few mirage-like months it seemed to be working. In this context, his own perfectly realistic ambitions to be elected Pope look less ignoble.

England was in the end too weak a power, and Henry VIII too capricious a king, for Wolsey to use them to leverage humanist dreams into existence. But there was nothing to stop his ambition, cunning and idealism from reshaping his own country. If England's Catholic Reformation had a start date, it was 1518, when Wolsey was made a papal legate with sweeping powers to reshape the English church. It was almost the first time that the Church of England, divided as it was between the two provinces of Canterbury and York, had been treated as a single entity. The flagship project Wolsey launched with these new powers was a sign of what might be to come. A huge amount of the English church's considerable wealth was tied up in monastic houses: communities whose cloistered piety was of course laudable, but was several turns of the spiral behind the times. Moreover, not all of the monks fully lived up to their orders' ideals. Wolsey used his new powers to close down a swathe of problematic or inconvenient houses, redirecting the funds to a much more fashionably pious purpose: education. A splendid new school in his hometown of Ipswich would feed into a splendid new college at his old university of Oxford.

Wolsey's project manager for this tricky enterprise was another compromised Catholic reformer. What made Thomas Cromwell stand out from London's crowd of ambitious jobbing lawyers was his years spent in Italy as a soldier, merchant and all-purpose man on the make. That had given him the contacts to find the Italian sculptors and artists

Wolsey wanted to employ, but Cromwell had picked up more in Italy than an ear for languages and an eye for marble. Like many northern Europeans who visited Rome during the height of the Renaissance Papacy's decadence, he left with a hunch that the Pope was part of the problem, not part of the solution, and that the cutting edge of the spiral of reform was now a long way from the old centre. It also gave him a very Italian sense of what reform might mean.

The Italian Reformation is a story now so thoroughly forgotten that the phrase sounds like a contradiction, but during the 1520s and 1530s it seemed like a real possibility. Much of the structure of the Church in Italy was corrupt or dysfunctional, so reformers worked around it. For decades individual reformers had been creating new orders and fraternities which explored patterns of simplified piety. In Germany, when a dispute about the doctrine of salvation triggered by a friar called Martin Luther flared up in 1517-18, it quickly turned into a slanging-match in which all the talk was of obedience, submission and heresy. In Italy, however, idealistic, loyal churchmen were keen to do with Luther what had been done with so many other disruptive reformers over the centuries: absorb, co-opt and housetrain his insights, views which pushed Catholic orthodoxy in a particular direction but which did not, yet, contradict it.

The 'Reformation' which Italy's so-called *spirituali* championed did not come to pass. The increasingly bitter confrontation with Luther's movement forced the Catholic world away from creative compromises. But we can easily imagine that, had Tudor marriage politics not intervened, it is the kind of Reformation that England would have had. If England had held onto its thousand-year tradition of loyal papalism, the result would not have been a simple extension of the medieval church, frozen in time. In that alternative history, England's monasteries would not have been suppressed systematically as they were in the 1530s, but nor would they have sailed on into the modern era untouched. Eager Catholic reformers, keen

to build a nation of earnest believers and wary of the formalism and superstition that accreted around monastic life, would have continued where Wolsey and Cromwell had begun, systematically repurposing the monasteries' enormous wealth to more modish purposes like education, missionary work and the relief of the poor. In a century of rapid economic change, with populations rising, wages falling and landowners driving their tenants off the land and into destitution, a reforming Catholic church would have pushed back against this new economy and its consequences, although probably with more zeal than effect. Defending the 'commonwealth' against depredations such as the enclosure of land and the blocking of rivers with fish-weirs became a Protestant cause in the 1540s and 1550s, but there is no doctrinal reason why it should have been so. Reforming Catholic bishops such as Erasmus' friend Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London and Durham, found this moral case as compelling as did evangelicals like Thomas Cromwell.