

# The Fall and Rise of Fasting in the British Reformations<sup>1</sup>

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The subject of fasting has received surprisingly little attention from historians of the Reformations in Britain: whether it is the formal, collective fasts which are our subject here, or the private or household fasts which many Protestants encouraged and some may also have practised.<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps it is not surprising, because the outlines of the subject are almost too clear to need explanation. The Catholic Church, both pre- and post-Reformation, institutionalized regular fasting as part of the believer's life. 'Fasting', in this context, primarily meant abstinence from the meat of land animals and birds, and from so-called white meats, that is, dairy products and eggs. Catholic Christians were expected to keep to this regimen during Lent, on Ember days, on the eves of numerous saints' days and on virtually every Friday throughout the year. Protestants of every kind rejected this practice as works-righteousness, legalism and superstition, using the language of Christian liberty. Famously, the tipping-point of the Reformation in Zurich was the ostentatious eating of a small

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the research for this paper was carried out during two fellowships at the Folger Shakespeare Library in 2006 and 2009. Earlier versions were presented to the Reformation Studies Colloquium (2008), the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference (2008), the Folger's own seminar (2009) and the British State Prayers Conference (2010): I am grateful to all those audiences for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> See principally Christopher Durston, "'For the better humiliation of the people": Public Days of Fasting and Thanksgiving During the English Revolution', *The Seventeenth Century*, 8 (1992), pp. 129–49; an important but limited discussion by Peter Iver Kaufman, 'Fasting in England in the 1560s: "A Thing of Nought"?', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 94 (2003), pp. 176–93; C.J. Kitching, "'Prayers fit for the time": Fasting and Prayer in Response to National Crises in the Reign of Elizabeth I', in W.J. Shiels (ed.), *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition* (Studies in Church History, 22; Oxford 1985), pp. 241–50. W. Ian P. Hazlett, 'Playing God's Card: Knox and Fasting, 1565–66', in Roger Mason (ed.), *John Knox and the British Reformations* (Aldershot, 1998) is invaluable on the Scottish situation; Raymond A. Mentzer, 'Fasting, Piety and Political Anxiety among French Reformed Protestants', *Church History*, 76 (2007), pp. 330–62, despite its title, is not only about France. Modern study of the subject all looks back to H.R. Trevor-Roper, 'The Fast Sermons of the Long Parliament', in his *Essays in British History: Presented to Sir Keith Feiling* (London, 1964), pp. 85–138.



piece of sausage on Good Friday 1522. Protestant establishments generally rejected the calendar of religious fasting.

This meant that fasting, amongst Protestants, took three courses. First, and most commonly, it was privatized, becoming something that pious individuals did on their own initiative when they felt the need. Second, it became an occasional public event, used in response to a real, anticipated or imagined public calamity. And third – a British peculiarity – fasting was secularized, as traditional practices persisted clad in new rationales. This chapter will briefly survey each of these three responses and consider what they mean for our understanding of worship and the Reformation as a whole.

## I

The use of fasting in Protestant private devotion is a large subject and one that is beyond the scope of this volume. But the process by which regular, regulated, public Catholic fasting gave way to irregular, private and self-imposed Protestant fasting is very much our concern. It changed both the private experience and the public face of what it meant to be a Christian. More than that, I suggest, it also provided significant lubrication for the process of religious change.

Fasting was only one of a large number of traditional pious practices which Protestants rejected, but it was one with particular significance. In the first generation or two of the Reformation era, until around 1550, conversion to Protestantism or to evangelicalism was not a clear-cut matter, since there were no sharply drawn confessional boundaries. There was no confession of faith to sign or to reject; the Henrician Oath of Supremacy was not seen as a confessional marker the way its Elizabethan successor was. Only Anabaptists could be sharply defined, by the provocative act of adult baptism. Evangelicals had a series of ways to assert their identities – Bible-reading, getting married (for clergy and religious), or acts of iconoclasm, for example – but all of them were ambiguous or limited. This is frustrating for those of us who like to try to apply religious labels to individuals, but it had obvious advantages at the time. Prospective converts could use ambiguous markers of identity to play both sides: to dabble their toes in evangelicalism without committing or incriminating themselves.

This is where fasting becomes important, for three reasons. First, evangelical teaching on fasting in the pre-1550 period made one point almost exclusively: Christians are not obliged to do it, and indeed, because it tends to hypocrisy and works-righteousness, Christians may have a duty not to do it. John Bale's point can stand as representative: if abstinence from food were good in itself, 'than were the deuyll most holye, which neuer



eateth nor drynketh'.<sup>3</sup> Second, fasting is on the face of it an unattractive activity. All other things being equal, most people would choose not to fast, if they can do so safely, respectably and with a clean conscience. Third, fasting had always been in some sense a voluntary activity. Not fully, of course: breaking fasts, and especially breaking the Lenten fast, was an offence against the discipline of the Church, and one which, in England, could sometimes lead to an accusation of heresy. But voluntary in the sense that eating is often a private or domestic activity, which individuals and households had to police for themselves; in the sense that the young, the old, the pregnant and the unwell could negotiate exemptions for themselves, so that very large numbers of people could indeed choose whether and to what extent to observe fasts; and in the sense that the boundaries of approved fasting were fuzzy. The rules said no flesh or white meats on the set days, and it was proverbial that some adhered only to the letter of the law, gorging themselves on (and drinking like) fish, or preparing subtle delicacies from the permitted ingredients. On the other side, many pious individuals went beyond the letter of the law, some fasting only on bread and water on fasting days, or going without food or even without drink entirely, or fasting on other days in addition to the set times, notably on Wednesdays. A set of verses printed in around 1500 urged readers to fast on Wednesdays, promising that those who did would be miraculously protected from dying unshriven, but its anecdotes of such miracles also testify to how rare the practice of Wednesday fasting was: one member of a ship's crew, one man amongst an army, adhered to it. And even then the book only advocated fasting from flesh, not from white meats.<sup>4</sup> So it was, to a considerable extent, up to individual believers how strictly or laxly they observed the set fasts.

All this combined to make fast-breaking an alluring way into evangelicalism. The opportunity was made much plainer when, in the first week of Lent 1538, Henry VIII issued a proclamation relaxing that year's fast. Citing a poor fish catch, which had driven prices up, and claiming that the Lenten fast was 'a mere positive law of the church, and used by a custom', the proclamation permitted the consumption of white meats that Lent. It nevertheless urged the English to fast with due devotion. We have no record of this proclamation being renewed in any of the following three years, but we do know that it was reissued in 1542 and again in 1543,

<sup>3</sup> John Bale, *Yet a course at the romyshe foxe. A dysclosynge or openynge of the Manne of synne* (Antwerp, 1543: RSTC 1309), fo. 64v.

<sup>4</sup> *Here beginneth a lytel treatyse that sheweth how euery man [and] woman ought to faste and absteine them from flesshe on ye Wednesday* (Westminster, 1500?: RSTC 24224).



and it may have been an annual event.<sup>5</sup> The so-called 'book of ceremonies' drawn up in 1539, an attempt at an official statement of what the English Church's remaining ceremonies meant, similarly accepted that the existing regulations for fasting were entirely arbitrary and open to change at the king's pleasure.<sup>6</sup> It appears that this opened the gates to a flood of Lent-breaking, much of which went beyond the new permissions. The official admission that the rules could be changed so easily undermined the entire system. Thomas Becon, an evangelical author who took fasting more seriously than most of his English co-religionists, praised Henry as 'worthy of immortalite and eternall glory' for that proclamation.<sup>7</sup>

Whether or not the official relaxation of the fast encouraged it, there is no doubt that Lent-breaking became endemic in the last decade of Henry's life. In 1537, the conservative cleric Roland Phillips believed that the preaching of justification by faith had led 'the people' to abandon fasting and other good works.<sup>8</sup> On Maundy Thursday 1539, a Londoner ate a piece of bacon, 'for saveryng of her mowthe', and confessed her sin to her parish priest, who told her 'that yf [her] conscyence ... thought yt good yt was none offence'.<sup>9</sup> We find a Kentish cleric in 1542 preaching that 'masters and mistresses were bounde to eate egges, butter and chese in lent, to give ensample to their houshold to do the same'. One of his neighbours was said to have 'caused diuers to breake thair faste that were disposed to kepe it', saying that 'all daies be like', while another preached that 'allmighty God was neither pleased w<sup>t</sup> fasting nor discontent w<sup>t</sup> eating', and that on Whitsun eve 'you nede not to fast except you wil'.<sup>10</sup> As these cases suggest, fast-breaking was often something that one nibbled at piecemeal rather than devouring whole in a single sitting. The Ember days (the fast days at the start of the four seasons of the year), in particular the set in Rogation week, were flouted particularly often: an evangelical urban myth held that they had been instituted in honour of a papal concubine.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (eds), *Tudor Royal Proclamations 1485–1553* (New Haven and London, 1964), nos. 177, 209, 214.

<sup>6</sup> BL, Cotton MS, Cleopatra E.v, fo. 288r (LP, XIV (i), 374.3).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Becon, ps. Theodore Basille, *A potacion or drinkyng for this holi time of lent very comfortable for all penitent synners, newly prepared by Theodore Basille* (London, 1542: RSTC 1749), sig. G1v.

<sup>8</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. John Cox (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1846), p. 338.

<sup>9</sup> Corporation of London Record Office [CLRO], Court of Aldermen Repertory Book 10, fo. 90v.

<sup>10</sup> Corpus Christi College, Cambridge [CCCC], MS 128, pp. 45, 63, 83 (LP, XVIII (i), 546, pp. 306, 310, 315).

<sup>11</sup> LP, XI, 1424; CCCC, MS 128, p. 54 (LP, XVIII (i), 546, p. 308); G.R. Elton, *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*



What accelerated this process was that, while eating was often a private activity, it was rarely a solitary one. Company could lure one another into fast-breaking and encourage one another in so doing. One of the regular features of the unofficial, underground Reformations in England and Scotland was the Lent-breaking group. The ones which are documented include one in Norwich in 1537, an intercollegiate group in Oxford in 1539, a group in Calais in 1540, a group in St Andrews in 1548, and one in Dundee in the later 1550s. A drive against Lent-breaking in London in 1543 discovered that the fast was being routinely ignored in a swathe of aristocratic households, as well as in humbler ones. Some of the offenders were imprisoned, but many of them had already secured dispensations from the fast: for those with the right connections, it was becoming a voluntary discipline. In such cases, it was only possible to ask Lent-breakers to be more discreet. And despite the City authorities' efforts, their next drive in 1545 discovered the same problem, and many of the same households, offending.<sup>12</sup> And indeed, the same suppliers: for a time, it seems, a discreet and sympathetic butcher was an invaluable contact in evangelical circles.

Some of these groups were plainly Protestant conventicles. In two cases, one from London in 1540 and one from Tullibody in Clackmannanshire in 1539, it appears that the occasion for a collective Lent-breaking was the wedding feast for an illegally married priest.<sup>13</sup> But commonly these seem to have been more religiously fluid occasions, using meals to draw outsiders into evangelical company, implicating them in a venial offence to see if they had a taste for more. A Salisbury evangelical named William Holmes who 'contemptuouslye refused to kepe and obserue the Imber fast' was also accused of having by 'subtyll wayes ... alluryd the sonnys' of his neighbour to share his beliefs.<sup>14</sup> The relative safety of fast-breaking was also one of the means by which evangelicalism could cautiously emerge into the open. In February 1540, the members of an English embassy to Scotland

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(Cambridge, 1972), p. 376; Muriel McClendon, *The Quiet Reformation: Magistrates and the Emergence of Protestantism in Tudor Norwich* (Stanford, 1999), p. 76; Henry Brinklow, ps. Roderyck Mors, *The complaynt of Roderyck Mors, for the redresse of certen wicked lawes* (Strassburg, 1542?: RSTC 3759.5), sig. H1v.

<sup>12</sup> TNA: PRO, SP1/141, fo. 232r; TNA: PRO, SP1/146, fos 252r–252v; TNA: PRO, SP1/158, fos 189v–190r; TNA: PRO, SP1/176, fos 152r, 156r (*LP*, XIII (ii), Addenda 19, XIV (i), 684, XV 460; XVIII (i), 315, 327); CLRO, Court of Aldermen Repertory Book 10, fo. 324v, Book 11, fo. 176r; John R. Dasent (ed.), *Acts of the Privy Council of England* (46 vols, London, 1890–1964), I, pp. 104, 106, 114; James Balfour Paul (ed.), *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (13 vols, Edinburgh, 1877–1978), X, pp. 369–70; Alec Ryrie, *The Origins of the Scottish Reformation* (Manchester, 2006), p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> CLRO, Court of Aldermen Repertory Book 10, fo. 169v; David Calderwood, *The History of the Kirk of Scotland*, ed. Thomas Thomson (Wodrow Society, 8 vols; Edinburgh, 1842–49), I, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> TNA: PRO, STAC 2/17/261.



were reported to be breaking Lent. Cardinal Beaton issued a proclamation warning that he would treat this as heresy; whereupon Sir Ralph Sadler, head of the English mission, protested to his host King James V. The whole exchange was conducted by nods and winks. Sadler, in truth a confirmed evangelical, did not claim the freedom of the Gospel. Rather, he assured James that he was merely eating white meats, not flesh – as Henry VIII had permitted in previous years. His reason? ‘I confess that I eat eggs and white meats, because I am an evil fishman, and I think it none offence. For if it were ... I would be as loath to eat it as the holiest of your priests.’ James, characteristically, saw an opportunity to put the cardinal in his place. He replied that Sadler could eat what he liked, regardless of what Beaton might say, and he also ensured that the message was borne by an evangelical herald who sauced it with some anticlerical commentary. Sadler’s weak stomach was a transparent excuse for abandoning Lenten discipline.<sup>15</sup>

To begin to break the Lenten fast in England or Scotland in the 1530s or 1540s was a real act of rebellion, and took a conscious decision: but that decision was eased by inertia, selfishness and a weakening sense of social obligation. Lent-breaking did not make you an evangelical. But some people were liable to interpret it that way, and it might well throw you convivially into the company of those who were willing to defend in principle what you had all decided to do in practice.

In other words, part of Protestantism’s appeal was its relaxation of irksome moral duties.<sup>16</sup> This was of course a problem for Protestants. It was all well and good to reject the Catholic use of fasting, and good fun could be had while doing so, but Protestant theologians were unwilling to reject fasting altogether, for three reasons. First, to do so was a propaganda gift: fasting was a widely accepted sign of holiness of life, and to abandon it seemed to yield the moral high ground to Catholicism. (It helped – but only a little – that Christ had been accused of abandoning fasting in just the same way.<sup>17</sup>) Second, Protestants took their Bibles seriously, and they could not escape the fact that both the Old and the New Testaments repeatedly and explicitly enjoined fasting as a key part of godly living. Third, which may be the most important, experience also convinced many of them that fasting was a central part of the godly life. A British Protestant theology of right fasting developed very early on. It is there in all its essentials in Tyndale; Thomas Becon spelt it out in 1542 and became the first writer in English

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Clifford (ed.), *The State Papers and Letters of Sir Ralph Sadler* (2 vols. Edinburgh, 1809), I, pp. 47–8 (LP, XV, 249).

<sup>16</sup> Alec Ryrie, ‘Counting Sheep, Counting Shepherds: The Problem of Allegiance in the English Reformation’, in Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie (eds), *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 99–105.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 11:19.



to give it book-length treatment in 1551; it is essentially unchanged when expounded again by Thomas Cartwright in 1580, and is not really altered significantly when taken over by Laudians in the 1630s.<sup>18</sup> This theology stresses that fasting is not, of course, about earning favour in God's eyes. Rather, it is both an outward sign of inner repentance, and a means of stirring oneself up to that repentance. The term which is universally used for it is *humiliation*. It is a means of signifying to God and to oneself that one's repentance is not merely lip-service, but rather reflects a true sorrow for sin. Becon argued that a true fast took place when the Christian is so overcome with sorrow for sin that 'the verye trouble of hys heart wyl not suffer him to eat or drynke'.<sup>19</sup> But Cartwright's reading, which reversed Becon's cause and effect, became more standard: he argued that abstinence (whether from food, or from sleep, fine clothing, the marriage bed or other earthly benefits) served 'to draw vs to a feeling of our vnworthiness, so in the feeling thereof, by them wee make a solemne confession of the same'.<sup>20</sup> And it was widely held that, as Archbishop Sandys put it, 'a full belly maketh a faint prayer.'<sup>21</sup> The Elizabethan Homilies taught that one fasts 'that the spirit may be more earnest and fervent to prayer.'<sup>22</sup> Or as Becon put it, 'the more the body is filled, the more the mind is dulled'.<sup>23</sup> All this led a great many Protestants, in official and unofficial documents, to argue for the appropriateness of private fasting as a part of Christian discipline: Becon, Cartwright, John Hooper, John Knox, James Pilkington and many more.

The problem is that relatively few people seem actually to have done it. We should not be surprised. In Edwardian and Elizabethan England, and post-Reformation Scotland, set calendrical fasts were denounced as actively wicked; and congregations were regularly told that true fasting consisted in fasting from sin, with outward fasting a laudable but lesser ceremony. When Hugh Latimer preached on gluttony and the right use of

<sup>18</sup> William Tyndale, ed. Henry Walter, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures* (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1848), pp. 90–2; Thomas Becon, ps. Theodore Basille, *A neue pathway unto praier* (London, 1542: RSTC 1734), sigs. L5v–M1v; Thomas Becon, *A fruitful treatise of fasting wherin is declared what ye Christen fast is* (London, 1551: RSTC 1722); [Thomas Cartwright?], *The Holie Exercise of a True Fast, described out of Gods word* (London, 1580: RSTC 24251.5). For a Laudian view of the subject, see John Browning, *Concerning publike-prayer, and the fasts of the Church* (London, 1636: RSTC 3919).

<sup>19</sup> Becon, *A fruitful treatise*, sigs. C5v–C6r.

<sup>20</sup> [Thomas Cartwright?] and Thomas Wilcox, *Two treatises* (London, 1610: RSTC 4314), p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> *The Sermons of Edwin Sandys, DD*, ed. John Ayre (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1841), p. 275.

<sup>22</sup> *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of the Late Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1844), p. 254.

<sup>23</sup> Becon, *A fruitful treatise*, sigs. H7v, I3v.



food in 1552, he did not so much as hint that Christians might sometimes fast.<sup>24</sup> James Pilkington even set his readers five tests against which they must measure any planned fast, warning them to desist if they failed any one of them.<sup>25</sup> As a result, private fasting seems to have become rare, and a marker of unusual earnestness. English and Scots Protestants were painfully (and Catholics gleefully) aware of this. Edmund Grindal worried 'that in no one thing the adversary hath more advantage against us, than in the matter of fast, which we utterly neglect'.<sup>26</sup> John Bradford believed that in Edward's reign 'fasting to subdue the fleshe, was farre out of vse'.<sup>27</sup> John Redman wrote in 1551 that 'I cannot with great difficulty find one now in a whole cittie which fasteth one day' because 'men be so afrayd of popish superstition'.<sup>28</sup> The Catholic Thomas Harrab, describing the English Church in 1616, wrote that 'fewe ... fast or abstaine from flesh any day, if any doe he is suspected to be a Papist'.<sup>29</sup> The Arminian Henry Mason agreed in 1625 that many earnest Christians consider 'all such austerity to be Monkish, & superstitious & vngodly'.<sup>30</sup> John Feckenham preached that no one dared fast 'for feare they shulde be laughed to scorne'.<sup>31</sup> It was a standard Catholic accusation. When it was renewed in the papal bull of excommunication in 1570, John Jewel indignantly rejected the charge: 'What if some few be wanton, and neglect the wholesome use of fasting?'<sup>32</sup> But they were not few. In 1563 the Catholic Ninian Winzet felt confident in claiming that fasting had been entirely abandoned in Scotland.<sup>33</sup> And

<sup>24</sup> *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, ed. George Elwes Corrie (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1845), pp. 14–17.

<sup>25</sup> *The Works of James Pilkington, BD*, ed. James Scholefield (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1842), p. 559.

<sup>26</sup> *The Remains of Archbishop Grindal, DD*, ed. William Nicholson (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1843), p. 265.

<sup>27</sup> John Foxe, *Actes and monuments of matters most speciall in the church* (London, 1583: RSTC 11225), p. 1625.

<sup>28</sup> John Redman, ed. William Crashaw, *The complaint of grace, continued through all ages of the world* (London, 1609: RSTC 20826.5), p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Harrab, *Tessaradelphus, or The foure brothers* ([Lancashire?], 1616: RSTC 12797), sig. E4r.

<sup>30</sup> Henry Mason, *Christian Humiliation, Or, A Treatise of Fasting* (London, 1625: RSTC 17602), p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> TNA: PRO, SP1/228, fo. 55r (LP, XXI (ii), 710).

<sup>32</sup> *The Works of John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury*, ed. John Ayre (Parker Society; 4 vols; Cambridge, 1845–50), IV, p. 1141.

<sup>33</sup> Ninian Winzet, *The buke of fourscoir-thre questions* (Antwerp, 1563: RSTC 25859), sigs. G4v–G5r.



Mason lamented: 'who almost is there, euen among them that are counted religious, who finde themselues willing to vse any fasting at all?'<sup>34</sup>

Clearly private fasting of the kind the preachers advocated did take place. Some Protestants at least, under some circumstances, emphasized the Gospel injunction to keep their fasting secret.<sup>35</sup> John Knox claimed airily in 1566 that 'we dout not but the godlie within this Realme have used the same [fasting] as necessitie craved, albeit with the Papistes we blew no trumpetes', which may not inspire enormous confidence, but we have to take his word for it.<sup>36</sup> With the emergence of the Protestant spiritual journal in the late sixteenth century, we start to find concrete evidence of the practice.<sup>37</sup> But it is still pretty clear that it was unusual. Plenty of otherwise sincere and earnest Protestants could and did practice their faith from one year's end to the next with a full belly. This did no damage at all to their religion's practical appeal.

## II

Protestant discussions of fasting maintained a strict distinction between private and public fasts. The former were individual events, embarked on voluntarily in response to one's own sin and spiritual need. The latter were collective responses to real or impending public calamities, and once they had been established by lawful authority, participation was not voluntary. Here the biblical model was the prophet Jonah, whose warnings persuaded the sinful people of Nineveh to fall to fasting and prayer and so to avert the threatened judgement. Protestant exegetes noted that the king of Nineveh had compelled every soul under his care, and even the city's livestock, to take part in a total fast from all food or drink until God's wrath was turned aside. They were too pragmatic to imitate him, but he set a certain mood. If the Protestant aspiration to private fasting proved a little anticlimactic, they would make the public fast their own.

<sup>34</sup> Mason, *Christian Humiliation*, p. 110.

<sup>35</sup> William Perkins, *A godly and learned exposition of Christs Sermon in the Mount* (Cambridge, 1608; RSTC 19722), p. 338; Henry Scudder, *The Christians daily walke in holy securitie and peace ... First intended for private use; now (through importunity) published for the common good* (London, 1631; RSTC 22117), p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (6 vols, Edinburgh, 1846–64), VI, p. 394.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, M.M. Knappen (ed.), *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries by Richard Rogers and Samuel Ward* (Chicago, 1933), pp. 75–6, 89, 110; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London, 1702), book III, p. 111; Richard Kilby, *Hallelujah. Praise yee the Lord, for the unburthening of a loaden conscience* (London, 1635; RSTC 14956.7), p. 62; David Booy (ed.), *The Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington, 1618–1654: A Selection* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 56, 181–2; FSL, MS V.a.436, p. 43.



The joint fathers of the practice in the British Isles are Edmund Grindal and John Knox, who drew on Huguenot precedents and on the 'stranger' churches established in England.<sup>38</sup> Grindal was the likely author of the Elizabethan Homily on fasting, which laid out the theory of such events;<sup>39</sup> he was certainly the moving force behind the formal liturgy for a public fast created during the plague epidemic of 1563, which would remain the official model until Charles I's reign. In early 1566, the Scottish Reformed Church too issued an order for public fasting, this one being Knox's work.<sup>40</sup> As we have seen, both men were well aware of the accusation that Protestantism's neglect of fasting amounted to libertinism. They were determined to demonstrate that this was false.

Although no different from private fasts in their core theological rationale, these events were structured and regulated. Inevitably, this meant attendance at public worship, worship which was built around a lengthy sermon or, more commonly, a series of sermons. When parliament observed a fast in 1625, the king and the Lords spent six hours in Westminster Abbey, hearing two sermons. The Commons, in an ominous display of one-upmanship, spent nine hours in St Margaret's Westminster and heard three sermons; a witness noted with surprise that not one man present fainted.<sup>41</sup> The English order allowed for fast days on weekdays – most commonly on Wednesdays; sometimes just once, sometimes weekly for as long as a crisis persisted. The Scottish order adopted what swiftly became the invariable Scottish practice, an eight-day period of 'humiliation' which ran from Sunday to Sunday, in which the first and last days were days of actual fasting and the intervening week was a time of severe austerity – a bread-and-water diet was recommended, and public merrymaking of any kind (including marriages and baptisms) was forbidden.

In England, full-scale national fasts of this kind remained relatively rare: before 1625, they are only known to have happened in 1563, 1596 and 1603.<sup>42</sup> However, it seems that there was a good deal more public or

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<sup>38</sup> They did not, interestingly, draw on Calvin: the first recorded public fast in Geneva took place in 1567, three years after Calvin's death. Mentzer, 'Fasting, Piety and Political Anxiety', p. 356.

<sup>39</sup> *Certain Sermons or Homilies*, p. 249.

<sup>40</sup> *Remains of Archbishop Grindal*, pp. 83–94; *Works of John Knox*, VI, pp. 393–417.

<sup>41</sup> George Roberts (ed.), *The Diary of Walter Yonge, Esq., Justice of the Peace, and M.P. for Honiton, written at Colyton and Axminster, Co. Devon, from 1604 to 1628* (Camden Society, o.s. 41; London, 1848), p. 86.

<sup>42</sup> For these and subsequent statistics, see *National prayers: special worship since the Reformation. Volume 1: Fasts, Thanksgivings and Occasional Prayers in the British Isles. 1535–1870*, ed. Alasdair Raffe, Natalie Mears, Stephen Taylor and Philip Williamson with Lucy Bates (Church of England Record Society, in preparation for 2013) and Table 2.1 in Natalie Mears's essay in this volume.



semi-public fasting going on below the radar screen. Of all the expressions of gathered godly piety which the Elizabethan regime disliked, the decision not to eat was perhaps the hardest to police; it is unsurprising that godly ministers adopted it in their meetings, as in Essex, or that they encouraged their flocks to join in the practice, as in 1580s Dorchester.<sup>43</sup> Puritan crowds were permitted to gather within sight of the Catholic prisoners at Wisbech in the 1590s for a day's preaching and fasting: a permission which served the regime's purposes for a while, and which was a foretaste of what was to come.<sup>44</sup> Such gatherings took place particularly when a public calamity was not met with a public fast, throwing the godly back onto their own initiative. When the Essex trained bands were summoned for the Armada crisis in 1588, Richard Rogers organized 40 of his flock into an impromptu public fast. He was pleased with the event, and organized another for the new and embattled Protestant king of France the next year.<sup>45</sup> Protestants in both England and Scotland were also keen to fast collectively in support of their embattled co-religionists during the early stages of the Thirty Years War.<sup>46</sup> The Stuart regime was less keen on such confrontational gestures, one sign of how quickly fasting could become politically pointed. In Scotland, Presbyterians met to fast and pray while the parliament of 1621 was voting on the Perth Articles and on the suspension of nonconforming ministers. Informal but collective fasts were likewise held in London to bolster the work of the Puritans in the Long Parliament in 1641 and 1642.<sup>47</sup>

The regime may have seen this kind of semi-public fasting as subverting the official variety, but in practice the two seem to have drawn support from one another. This, at least, is the implication of one intriguing incident from the early seventeenth century. In England, a public fast was proclaimed during the plague epidemic of 1603; and Lady Margaret Hoby, the redoubtable Yorkshire Puritan, recorded the event in her diary. It was the first time in four years of diary-keeping that Hoby had mentioned fasting, and perhaps the first time she had ever done it. Nevertheless, she took to it like a fish to water. With the enthusiastic support of her minister, Richard Rhodes, who it seems had first persuaded her to keep a diary, she

<sup>43</sup> Tom Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c.1620–1643* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> William Weston, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, ed. and trans. Philip Caraman (London, 1955), pp. 164–5.

<sup>45</sup> Knappen, *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries*, pp. 79, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Calderwood, *History of the Kirk of Scotland*, VII, p. 453; [Thomas Scott], *The Belgicke Pismire: Stinging the slothfull Sleeper, and Awaking the Diligent to Fast, Watch, Pray* ('London' [i.e. Holland], 1622: RSTC 22069), pp. 88–9.

<sup>47</sup> James Kirkton, *The Secret and True History of the Church of Scotland*, ed. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe (Edinburgh, 1817), p. 16; Booy, *Notebooks of Nehemiah Wallington*, pp. 127, 155.



and the parish went beyond the set order. She set additional fast days for herself alongside the required ones, and on one of the official days, Rhodes and one of his colleagues kept the people in the church until two or three o'clock in the morning preaching at them, and taking a collection for the plague victims, before they all retired to their houses for a very late supper. Even more strikingly, the following year, Rhodes did it again, apparently entirely on his own initiative, holding a public fast in the parish church one day in September 1604. Hoby's diary ends soon thereafter, but it seems reasonable to deduce that this official liturgical novelty had sparked a pattern of imitations.<sup>48</sup>

Thereafter formal public fasting again fell into abeyance for a while, but with the renewed epidemic of 1625, shortly after Charles I's accession, another order was issued. The new king was enthusiastic in his observance of the order, and now English public fasts came thick and fast: 1626, 1628, 1629, 1636, and 1637. Archbishop Laud apparently did not share his king's zeal for the practice, and events may have proved him right. For there is a considerable upswing of interest in fasting from 1625 onwards, as evidenced by a stream of new publications on the subject from all sides of the religious debate. In 1631 Henry Scudder amended his bestselling devotional guide, *The Christians daily walke*, to include a substantial section on fasting.<sup>49</sup> It is ironic that Charles I succeeded in training his enemies in the use of a pious practice which was to become one of the sinews of their war effort; for during the Civil War and Interregnum period, public fasts became routine. Parliament enforced a monthly public fast, which began as a response to the Irish rebellion but took on a life of its own and lasted from 1642 to 1649. Royalists, too, were supposed to observe a monthly fast during the Civil War, on a different date. The late Chris Durston reckoned that there were over 130 public fast days enforced in England in the 1640s and 1650s.<sup>50</sup>

Those monthly fasts during the 1640s point us to another part of the story: the question of regularity in fasting. This was a sensitive point, because it was a mainstay of Protestant polemic to distinguish between good Protestant fasting, which was a response to private or public sin or calamity and so was necessarily ad hoc, and bad Catholic fasting, which was conducted according to a set calendar, and therefore formal and hypocritical. In practice, however, this distinction made limited sense. It threatened to break down almost from the beginning, and in the seventeenth century it actually did so. The tensions are visible in William

<sup>48</sup> Dorothy M. Meads (ed.), *The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599–1605* (London, 1930), pp. 206–7, 213.

<sup>49</sup> Scudder, *The Christians daily walke*, pp. 68–146.

<sup>50</sup> Durston, “For the better humiliation of the people”, pp. 132–4.



Perkins's treatment of the subject, for example. His list of occasions for fasting includes troubles such as living in a sinful society, or needs such as that for blessing on godly ministers. As he himself admitted, these provided 'continuall occasions of fasting'. He explicitly refused to deduce regular, set fasts from this, but he admitted that some reformed Churches did do so.<sup>51</sup>

One natural step was for pious individuals to adopt a set pattern for their private fasts. This was relatively uncontroversial, since such patterns were understood to be self-imposed and not binding on the conscience, and therefore did not violate Gospel liberty. Scudder described fasting as a kind of spiritual spring-cleaning, which 'will put the soule ... into such an habit of spiritualnesse, that ... it will be kept cleane with ordinary sweeping a quarter of a yeare, or long time after'.<sup>52</sup> That certainly seems to have been Rogers's and Wallington's experience. Another bestselling Caroline divine, William Pemble, recommended taking one day a month for prayer, fasting and self-examination.<sup>53</sup> But again, the blurring of the line between private and public fasting meant that such regular personal disciplines could easily become collective, as they did amongst the godly Essex ministers. This seems to have been particularly so in Scotland. The Scottish ministers who were exiled to England in 1584 adopted a collective discipline under which they observed the eight-day Scottish fast once a month, and concluded it by celebrating the Eucharist.<sup>54</sup> In the early seventeenth century, that practice evolved from a simple abstinence from food on the morning of a Eucharist to the holding of a full-scale fast in the weeks before a celebration, as a spiritual preparation for it, so that fasting became a kind of anti-Eucharist, a spiritual fast anticipating the spiritual feast. This was used periodically in Scotland from the 1590s onwards and became widespread after 1638.<sup>55</sup> It also became a characteristic of the huge revivalist outdoor communion festivals which developed in southwest Scotland in the 1620s and spread to Ulster in the 1630s, when there was a monthly Friday fast held at Antrim, with huge crowds gathering for a day of preaching in advance of a Eucharistic celebration on the Sunday.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Perkins, *Godly and learned exposition*, pp. 330–1, 335.

<sup>52</sup> Scudder, *The Christians daily walke*, p. 142.

<sup>53</sup> William Pemble, *An introduction to the vvorthy receiving the sacrament of the Lords Supper* (London, 1628: RSTC 195798), pp. 49–50.

<sup>54</sup> William McMillan, *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church, 1550–1638* (Dunfermline, 1931), p. 333.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197–8, 226–7; cf. Mentzer, 'Fasting, Piety and Political Anxiety', p. 340.

<sup>56</sup> W.K. Tweedie (ed.), *Select Biographies Edited for the Wodrow Society, Chiefly from the Manuscripts in the Library of the Faculty of Advocates*, vol. I (Wodrow Society, 2 vols; Edinburgh 1845–7), I, p. 143; cf. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scottish Communion and American Revivals in the Early Modern Period* (Princeton, 1989).



And if formal, compulsory public fasts never attained to quite this level of regularity, they did eventually become almost routine in Scotland. At least 18 public fasts were ordered for the Scottish Church between 1566 and 1600: the rate then slows down, with a long gap between 1601 and 1621, but it picks up again dramatically in the mid seventeenth century, with at least 33 public fasts between 1638 and 1660. Of course, these were years which were genuinely thick with real and threatened calamities, but what were supposed to be irregular events were becoming institutionalized. Periodic fasting began as an occasional response to specific events; it morphed into a habit.

So was the Protestant public fast really so different from its reviled Catholic predecessor? Clearly it was: in mood, in polemical intensity and in theological content. And yet there was a tendency to drift back into the same patterns of regular observation, connected to the sacrament. And while the Catholic view of fasting as a meritorious work was rejected, the Protestant argument that fasting sharpened prayer could and did easily become mechanistic. It is one thing to cite, as Protestant writers from Becon onwards did, the old commonplace that fasting gives wings to prayer; indeed, also to claim, as Cartwright did, that fasting is 'a Grindestone, to make a poynt of [prayer], that it may pierce; and to set an edge, that it may cut, both the visible and inuisible enimies, which wee pray against'.<sup>57</sup> It is perhaps another for Richard Sibbes to claim, in 1640, that those who pray and have 'watered the seed with mourning' for their sins '[cannot] but hope for good success', success which he defined in worldly as well as spiritual terms.<sup>58</sup> Or for Scudder to claim that 'it was never read or heard of, that a fast was kept in truth according to the former directions from the Word, but either obtained the particular thing for which it was kept, or a better'.<sup>59</sup> His contemporaries were ready to move from the general to the particular. Henry Burton observed in 1628 that, when general public fasts were held in 1625 and 1626, in both cases the unseasonable weather changed dramatically for the better on the very day of the fast.<sup>60</sup> The Exeter Puritan Walter Yonge also observed that the weather broke on the day of the fast in 1626, and preserved a tale of eight labourers who refused to observe the fast, and were soon thereafter caught

<sup>57</sup> Becon, *Newe pathwaye unto praier*, sig. M2v; Scudder, *The Christians daily walke*, p. 70; Mason, *Christian Humiliation*, p. 77; Cartwright and Wilcox, *Two treatises*, pp. 35–6.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Sibbes, 'The Spiritual Favourite at the Thone of Grace', in *Works*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart (7 vols, Edinburgh, 1862–4), VI, pp. 103–4.

<sup>59</sup> Scudder, *The Christians daily walke*, p. 142.

<sup>60</sup> Henry Burton, *Israels Fast. Or a Meditation vpon the Seuenth Chapter of Joshuah* (London, 1628: RSTC 4147), p. 15.



in a thunderstorm, which struck four of them dead and drove the other four mad with terror.<sup>61</sup>

William Prynne was even more incautious. In 1636 he denounced the new, Laudian order for a public fast during time of plague, which (to his horror) omitted preaching. Remarkably, however, Prynne tried to prove statistically that this flawed fast was failing. He claimed that God's 'plagues and judgements ... have strangely increased since this fast begun ... the totall number dying of the plague the week before the fast being but 458 and 58 parishes infected, and the very first week of the fast 838 ... and 67 parishes infected', and a variety of other towns newly infected. This is 'cleare evidence, that GOD is much offended with these purgations, and the restraint of preaching on the fast day'.<sup>62</sup>

If we ask bluntly whether fasting was being used as a magical ritual to manipulate God's activity in the world, we have to answer no – but we also have to admit that that tendency was present. Knox, Cartwright, Arthur Hildersam and others cited one of the slipperiest biblical examples of fasting, King Ahab's fast in I Kings 21. Ahab, although he was a godless wretch of a king, was nevertheless given worldly blessing by God for his fasting. Even 'the shadow of this exercise,' Cartwright deduced, 'doth heale some diseases ... This extraordinarie obedience & exercise in the worshippe of God, must needes receiue speciall, and extraordinary blessinges from his hand.'<sup>63</sup> True, for those predestined to Hell it could only bring blessings in this life, as their eternal fate was long since sealed. Even so, fasting offered Protestants some purchase on their otherwise dauntingly unmanipulable God. And for a religion so phobic about ritual activity this was the perfect ritual, for fasting of course consists of *abstinence* from activity. It was one of the ways in which Protestantism could re-acquire a ritual life despite itself.

### III

The oddest part of the story remains. For while Catholic fasting was reviled in post-Reformation England and Scotland, the traditional fast days were not entirely abandoned in either country. In England, a proclamation of January 1548 finally abandoned the much-waived restriction on eating white meats. The same proclamation, however, also insisted that fasting

<sup>61</sup> Roberts (ed.), *Diary of Walter Yonge*, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup> William Prynne, *Newes from Ipswich* (Edinburgh, 1636?: RSTC 20469) sigs. A3r, A4v.

<sup>63</sup> Cartwright and Wilcox, *Two treatises*, pp. 39–40; cf. *Works of John Knox*, VI, p. 400; Arthur Hildersam, *The Doctrine of Fasting and Praier, and Humiliation for Sinne* (London, 1633: RSTC 13459), pp. 62–3.



from flesh during Lent and on other days should be retained: this was both to encourage the king's subjects to mortify themselves, and 'for worldly and civil policy'. The proclamation claimed that two civil benefits arose from fasting. First, it helped to preserve England's fishing fleet, by ensuring a market for its products. (It was all but universally assumed in the early modern period that no one would eat fish by choice.) Second, it helped to conserve England's livestock: for Lent was the season for lambing, calving and farrowing, and it made sense to preserve animals from the butcher at that time of year.<sup>64</sup> A similar regime was maintained under Elizabeth. This required that most traditional fast days be kept, including Lent, the Ember days, every Friday and even every Wednesday. However, the fast was only to be from flesh and its purpose was explicitly to support the fishing fleet. The legislation went out of its way to state that these rules were 'purposely intended and ment politikely for thincrease of Fishermen and Mariners ... and not for any Supersticion'.<sup>65</sup>

In Scotland, there is a parallel story. Queen Mary's government in 1562, and more remarkably, Regent Morton's in 1574 and 1575 reiterated the existing legal prohibitions on eating flesh during Lent (only Lent). The law which they were enforcing justified the fast with reference to 'the Law of God and constitution of halie kirk'<sup>66</sup> but the new decrees referred only to secular concerns. The proclamation, which was to be read from every market cross in Scotland in 1574 and 1575, claimed that 'in the spring tyme of the yeir callit Lentren, all kyndis of flesche debilitattis, decayis and growis out of sessioun, unmeit to be eitten ... All nationis in that consideratioun cheiflie hes forborne the eitting of flesche during that tyme.' The transparent mendacity of that claim was reinforced by the span of the fast proclaimed: six weeks, from the first Sunday in Lent to Easter Sunday – but of course the popish festival of Easter was not observed in Reformed Scotland, so the proclamation simply stated that the fast in 1574 ran from 28 February to 11 April, as if those dates were arbitrary and the fact that Rome called 11 April 1574 Easter Sunday was merely a coincidence. Thereafter the record falls silent for a decade: but in 1586 James VI's government required fasting from flesh not merely in Lent but also on all Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and envisaged a bureaucratic system for providing medical certificates for those too ill to comply.<sup>67</sup> The town council of Edinburgh made periodic attempts to

<sup>64</sup> *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, pp. 507–8.

<sup>65</sup> 5<sup>th</sup> Eliz. c.5 (1563).

<sup>66</sup> *The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson (11 vols, Edinburgh, 1814–44), II, p. 493.

<sup>67</sup> John Hill Burton and David Masson (eds), *The Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* (14 vols, Edinburgh, 1877–98), II, pp. 337, 431; IV, p. 49.



enforce these orders.<sup>68</sup> We may doubt how widely they were observed, but lip-service continued to be paid to them until the 1630s, and there was even an ineffectual attempt to revive them after the Restoration.<sup>69</sup>

This bizarre survival is steeped in ambiguity. It should be emphasized that the reasons of civil policy which both regimes cited were in earnest. A case can be made that the artificial support which Lent gave to the fishing industry really did help to drive European maritime expansion, forcing fishermen ever further out into the Atlantic.<sup>70</sup> And there is no doubt that contemporaries were serious about the practical need both to maintain the consumption of fish and restrict the consumption of meat. The regimes' Protestant apologists of course found it politic to claim to believe this,<sup>71</sup> and conservative defenders of traditional practice were glad to use the argument.<sup>72</sup> But the English privy council maintained in private as well as in public that fish-days were 'requisite in policy for the maintenance of mariners, fishmen, and the navy of the realm', and harried the bishops to enforce them on that basis.<sup>73</sup> The Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, unsurprisingly, were concerned about the issue and petitioned parliament to enforce the law in 1571.<sup>74</sup> Hard-bitten naval officers, including men of unmistakable Protestant sympathies, passionately defended fish-days as a military necessity. Without them, they feared, England's fishing fleet would atrophy, and with it the nation's reserve of ships and of skilled mariners. They worried that Wednesdays, in particular, were not observed by as much as a tenth of the population. And as well as the naval issue, the need to minimize the slaughter of livestock during breeding season was apparently taken seriously; commonwealth-minded writers fretted about it in other contexts too. One worried policy-maker's memorandum calculates that if the law were to be enforced properly, the number of cattle slaughtered annually by London's butchers would fall by 13,500, and the number of sheep by ten times that number.<sup>75</sup> That memo's calculations eventually made their way into a draft proclamation in 1597, which victuallers were supposed to paste up in their houses. This insisted both that the regulation

<sup>68</sup> J.D. Marwick (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh AD 1403–1589* (Scottish Burgh Records Society, 4 vols; Edinburgh, 1869–1882) III, p. 194; IV, p. 487.

<sup>69</sup> McMillan, *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, pp. 324–6.

<sup>70</sup> Brian Fagan, *Fish on Friday: Feasting, Fasting and the Discovery of the New World* (New York, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Becon, *Prayers and Other Pieces*, ed. John Ayre (Parker Society; Cambridge, 1844), p. 621; *Works of John Jewel*, IV p. 1142.

<sup>72</sup> Foxe, *Actes and monuments* (1583), p. 1343; FSL, MS V.a.399, fo. 19r.

<sup>73</sup> *Remains of Archbishop Grindal*, p. 407.

<sup>74</sup> TNA: PRO, SP12/77, fo. 173 (Robert Lemon (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series ... 1547–80* (London, 1856), p. 411).

<sup>75</sup> [Scott], *Belgicke Pismire*, p. 83; FSL, MS V.b.303, pp. 7–10, 15–16.



was necessary for 'the better maintenaunce of the Navye of this land' and also that this was entirely unconnected to the fact that 'in tymes past a fayned ceremonye therein was used'.<sup>76</sup>

So was the seamless continuity of fasting days between the old and new order merely a convenience, an attempt to harness an old practice for new reasons? In Edward VI's reign at least, some reformers seem to have been thinking this way. In a knockabout pamphlet of 1548, a personified Lent was made to admit that he was 'the mere inuencion & ordinaunce of man fyrst inuented for a polityke ordre', and now maintained by his 'faythfull fryndes, as well fyshmongers as other'. He warned that unless Lent-observance was reformed, fasting would vanish entirely, and with it the fishmongers' livelihoods.<sup>77</sup> This seems to imply breaking the link between fish-days and the traditional calendar of fasts, as Martin Bucer was urging his English hosts to do. In 1551 the Venetian ambassador in England reported that the regime was indeed contemplating moving its fish-days to other days of the week to avoid the appearance of popery.<sup>78</sup> This did not happen, and perhaps it was thought simply that the existing system was a better way of keeping fish consumption up. The apparent difficulties of enforcing the Wednesday fish-day in particular suggest that caution would have been justified. And clearly the sudden abolition of fish-days would have constituted the removal of a massive subsidy to a strategic and capital-intensive industry, although the economy of Tudor England certainly absorbed other shocks of comparable magnitude. But the maintenance of the old fast days as fish-days also allowed the English Church to play it both ways. On the one hand, Puritans such as Robert Bolton, William Gouge or Henry Scudder could bluntly deny that fish-days were in any sense religious fasts, insisting that they were purely civic.<sup>79</sup> But Bishop Jewel could also respond indignantly to the claim (otherwise uncomfortably plausible) that the English Church had abolished fasting. 'What one fish-day is changed throughout the whole year?' he preached in 1570.

What Lenten, Ember, Saturday, Friday, or other usual fasting-day? ... Nay, besides those days which our forefathers kept, we have appointed that

<sup>76</sup> TNA: PRO, SP12/265, fos 38v–39r (Mary A.E. Green (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series ... 1595–97* (London, 1869), p. 540).

<sup>77</sup> *The recantacio[n] of Jacke lent* (London, 1548: RSTC 15461), sigs. A2v, A4r.

<sup>78</sup> Kaufman, 'Fasting in England in the 1560s', p. 181; Rawdon Brown et al. (eds), *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts, Relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice, and in Other Libraries of Northern Italy. 1202–[1674]* (38 vols, London, 1864–1947), V, no. 703 (p. 347).

<sup>79</sup> Robert Bolton, *A three-fold treatise* (London, 1634: RSTC 3255), book III p. 44; William Gouge, *ΠΑΝΟΠΛΙΑ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ. The Whole-Armor of God* (London, 1616: RSTC 12122), p. 456; Scudder, *The Christians daily walke*, pp. 68–9.



Wednesday in every week throughout the year be kept fish-day, and that no manner of person shall eat flesh on the same day ... We cannot hear of the like increase of fasting-days procured by the pope.<sup>80</sup>

Bishop Pilkington made a similar case.<sup>81</sup>

There is no doubt that plenty of serious Protestants in England saw their Lenten observance as a religious as well as a secular discipline. George Herbert's view was unequivocal: 'Welcome deare feast of Lent ... The Scriptures bid us *fast*; the Church sayes, *now*.' And his description of the country parson's fasts, held every Friday, makes it clear that these are fish-days rather than days of humiliation in the godly sense.<sup>82</sup> Herbert is himself a slippery fish, but more straightforwardly godly Protestants agreed. Lady Anne Clifford noted neglect of observation fish-days in her diary, and in 1617, when she failed to observe the official diet in Lent until Good Friday, she resolved as an act of penitence to keep every Friday as a fish-day thereafter.<sup>83</sup> Daniel Featley, always an ambiguous figure, argued that alongside extraordinary public fasts, which were held when occasion demanded it, there should be regular 'fasts against sinne', which was of course an endemic condition. These he identified explicitly with Lent and the other traditional fasts. Against the claim that fish-days were purely civic, he argued that they were:

a mixed constitution; partly ciuill, appointed by the King or State, to preserue young cattell, spend fish, and encourage fishermen: Partly Ecclesiasticall ordered by the Church for Religious ends.<sup>84</sup>

On a historical level, at least, it is very hard to disagree with that. To deny that Lent had any religious element required a conscious effort to blinker oneself. For mainstream Protestants like the Dorset minister John Mayo, it simply seemed a statement of the obvious that Lent was ordained both for civic and for religious purposes.<sup>85</sup>

These attitudes were, of course, an open door for Laudian reformers. Richard Hooker stressed the link between fasting and the liturgical

<sup>80</sup> *Works of John Jewel*, IV p. 1142.

<sup>81</sup> *Works of James Pilkington*, pp. 556–61.

<sup>82</sup> *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 86, 241–2.

<sup>83</sup> David J.H. Clifford (ed.), *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud, 1990), pp. 43, 54.

<sup>84</sup> Daniel Featley, *Ancilla Pietatis: Or, the Hand-Maid to Priuate Devotion* (London, 1626: RSTC 10726), pp. 507, 542–3.

<sup>85</sup> John Mayo, *A Sermon of fasting, and of Lent* (London, 1609: RSTC 17755), pp. 34–



calendar, and in the 1620s and 1630s it became a commonplace to argue for the observation of Lent and even of the Ember days as a religious duty. There were explicit attempts to attach the medieval practice of Wednesday fasting to the Wednesday fish-day.<sup>86</sup> A manuscript sermon surviving from that period insists that 'were men left to fast & mourne only when they please, we know how litle this exercise doth please vs ... We y<sup>e</sup> sin delightfully must weepe bitterly: & it is but ill leaving vs to take our owne Times for it.'<sup>87</sup> It is a sentiment at once triumphantly Laudian and authentically Protestant.

These three perspectives show us something of the meaning of fasting in the British Reformations. It was a paradoxical practice, which illuminated the instability and contradictions of Protestantism. The initial attack on fasting was both part of Protestantism's appeal and one of its points of moral vulnerability. The attempt to reconcile it with Christian freedom ended up almost abolishing it: as Bishop Gardiner observed, Protestants preferred to mark Good Friday with 'notable and speciall bankets' than with a fast.<sup>88</sup> But the attempt to retain, reinvent and regularize fasting ended up recreating a practice recognizably similar to what had gone before, and even smuggling in the implication of works-righteousness. This uniquely deritualized ritual became both a site of and an accelerant of confessional conflict, a marker of identity and difference. At the same time, by its means Laudians, conformists and Puritans all attained to remarkably similar experiences. No one could quite shake off the perception that fasting did indeed give wings to prayer: a perception which, like so many other aspects of Protestant devotional life, opened cracks through which popery could seep back into the sterile ritual space which Protestant doctrine implied.

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<sup>86</sup> See, amongst many other examples, Ambrose Fisher, *A defence of the liturgie of the Church of England* (London, 1630: RSTC 10885), p. 31; Browning, *Concerning publike-prayer*, pp. 173–6, 181; Mason, *Christian Humiliation*; Webster, *Godly Clergy*, pp. 63–4.

<sup>87</sup> FSL, MS V.a.1, fos 11r–11v.

<sup>88</sup> Stephen Gardiner, *A detection of the deuils sophistrie, wherwith he robbeth the unlearned people, of the true byleef, in the sacrament of the aulter* (London, 1546: RSTC 11591), fo. 110v.