CHAPTER 4

Counting sheep, counting shepherds: the problem of allegiance in the English Reformation[1]

Alec Ryrie

I

Did the English jump into their peculiar Reformation, or were they pushed? The answer seems clear: the moving force behind religious change was obviously political pressure. We might ask, though, whether the English were so easy to push because they were already preparing to jump. A distinguished line of Protestant historians from John Foxe onwards has suggested that this was indeed the case. However, this argument would find few defenders today. Its key ingredients have come under sustained and more or less effective attack for a generation. In particular, the idea that there was widespread anticlericalism in late medieval England has been discredited.[2] We are reduced, therefore, to asking how quickly, and in what numbers, the English came to cooperate with the political forces propelling them. They *were* pushed; but a time came when most of them stopped resisting. As Patrick Collinson has suggested, in the 1570s – when both Catholic England and Catholic Europe were fading from living memory – insomniac historians begin to count Catholics rather than Protestants.[3]

This much is reasonably clear. More intractable is the question of how this transition from the Catholic nation of the 1520s to the more or less Protestant nation of the 1580s took place. The nature and meanings of conversion to evangelical ideas are discussed elsewhere in this volume by Peter Marshall. This essay is concerned with the linked and equally problematic question of the scale and speed of that conversion. With reference principally to the period before 1553, it will consider how many

[1] Among those who have assisted at various stages in my work on this article, I would especially like to thank Caroline Litzenberger, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Peter Marshall and Penny Roberts.

[2] Christopher Haigh, 'Anticlericalism and the English Reformation', *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh (Cambridge, 1987).

[3] Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 1988), ix.

evangelical sympathisers there were in England, and how rapidly their numbers grew. This question has been investigated with more diligence and ingenuity for England than for anywhere else in Europe: a result, no doubt, of the ideological temperature of the debates over the English Reformation. At the height of the 'revisionism' arguments, the question of whether Protestants or Catholics were better at filling pews was a key battleground. Nevertheless, the evidence remains fragmentary enough for scholars to continue to disagree wildly with one another. Geoffrey Elton could argue that, by 1553, England was so infected by a 'powerful heresy' that it was 'almost certainly nearer to being a Protestant country than to anything else'. Yet J. J. Scarisbrick could counter that most English people accepted the Reformation slowly and reluctantly, and Christopher Haigh could add that mid-century evangelicals were 'always an unpopular minority'. As Rosemary O'Day has pointed out, none of these assertions can be quantified.[4]

This is not for want of trying. Most historians who have tackled this question have tried to find some statistical or systematic evidence for their views, and have done so with varying levels of sophistication. The most obvious way to quantify religious allegiance is, of course, to count heads. The late John Fines's invaluable register of some 3,000 early English evangelicals has seemed a good starting point for this;[5] but his list is based largely on chance survivals of evidence and represents, as many have observed, the tip of an iceberg whose overall size is unknown and unknowable.[6] The majority of Fines's reformers are known only because they fell foul of the heresy laws under Henry VIII or Mary Tudor. We are therefore dealing only with the very hardest core of outspoken reformers – the committed, plus a handful of the unlucky. An attempt to count religious conservatives by the same means would be equally futile. Around such visible figures lies a penumbra of reformers whose commitment may have been real, but was never publicly tested; of fellow travellers, persuaded by reformist ideas but unwilling to put themselves

[4] G. R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (1977), 371; J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford, 1984), 1; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993), 202; Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (1986), 146.

[5] I am grateful to Professor Fines for providing me with a copy of his register. For attempts to use it in this way, see A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964; 2nd edition 1989), 325–6; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (1999), 109–10.

[6] A. G. Dickens, 'The early expansion of Protestantism in England, 1520–1558', *The Impact of the English Reformation 1500–1640*, ed. Peter Marshall (1997), 92. Haigh's optimism that the surviving evidence reveals most of the major reformist groups does not explain away Dickens's evidence that there were significant groups which we know about only through chance survivals of documentation. Haigh, *English Reformations*, 198–9.

in danger; of sympathisers, ready to listen to reformist preachers but not yet fully persuaded; of reformers of convenience, whose family, business or political connections were such that drifting into reformist circles was the path of least resistance. This penumbra may have been large or small, but it is invisible, at least by such direct means, and it is a critical part of the evangelical movement's shape.

The obvious unreliability of such direct methods of quantification has led historians, over the past forty years or so, to investigate other sources which might yield a clearer picture of religious allegiance in England. Sources such as churchwardens' accounts and rates of clerical marriage have their uses, of a somewhat oblique and limited kind.[7] The most intense and sustained research, however, has been devoted to wills, in the hope that changes in the pieties expressed by testators can be used to trace the process of religious change. From the 1530s onwards wills across England progressively abandoned the traditional pious formulæ which cite the Virgin Mary and the saints, replacing them with more ambiguous or – in some cases – apparently evangelical formulæ.[8] However, while wills constitute an invaluable window on to the lives and even the beliefs of individuals, the problems of using them to build a systematic representation of the shifts in English religious culture are legion. It is not merely that the pious formulæ were usually composed by a scribe, not the testator. J. D. Alsop and Christopher Marsh have shown that many testators did not even have much interest in the form of words the scribe used.[9] Nor is it clear whether the gradual transition from one theologically ambiguous set of formulæ to another represents

[7] Ronald Hutton, 'The local impact of the Tudor Reformations', *English Reformation Revised*, ed. Haigh; MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, 106; D. M. Palliser, 'Popular reactions to the Reformation during the years of uncertainty 1530–1570', *English Reformation Revised*, ed. Haigh, 100; Helen L. Parish, *Clerical Marriage and the English Reformation: Precedent, Policy and Practice* (Aldershot, 2000), 198–217.

[8] A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York 1509–1558* (Oxford, 1959), 172, 215; Peter Clark, *English Provincial Society from the Reformation to the Revolution: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent 1500–1640* (Hassocks, Surrey, 1977), 58; Claire Cross, 'The development of Protestantism in Leeds and Hull, 1520–1640: the evidence from wills', *Northern History* 18 (1982), 231–2; Jennifer Ward, 'The Reformation in Colchester, 1528–1558', *Essex Archaeology and History* 3rd series, vol. 15 (1983), 93; Elaine Sheppard, 'The Reformation and the citizens of Norwich', *Norfolk Archæology* 38 (1983), 54–6; Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 382–3; Caroline Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire 1540–1580* (Cambridge, 1997), 179–87.

[9] J. D. Alsop, 'Religious preambles in early modern English wills as formulae', *JEH* 40 (1989), 19–27; Christopher Marsh, 'In the name of God? Will-making and faith in early modern England', *The Records of the Nation*, ed. G. H. Martin and Peter Spufford (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1990).

a change in religious beliefs or one in scribal fashions.[10] The changes in testators' religious bequests, apparently almost as dramatic,[11] can also be interpreted, according to taste, as evidence of changing religious opinions or of realism in the face of a rapacious regime.[12] At best, wills tell a very partial story;[13] and bequests, importantly, can rarely tell us anything about positive allegiance to evangelical ideas. In investigating religious allegiance historians have to search for their evidence where the light is best, but wills have not repaid the attention which has been lavished on them. If the shift in preamble formulæ, from time-honoured phrases to new and more opaque ones, can be taken to mean anything at all, it is a sign neither of enthusiastic conversion nor of diehard conservatism, but rather of turbulence and confusion.[14]

The haphazard nature of almost all sixteenth-century documentation, and the elusive nature of religious belief in any era, makes any application of statistical methods to such questions distinctly limited. As Geoffrey Elton wrote a generation ago, 'A few examples prove nothing one way or another. . . . The only remedy, however, is to produce many examples.'[15] The promise of a statistical foundation to our understanding of the religious complexion of England is alluring, but we are in the end forced to turn to unashamedly anecdotal evidence.

II

Contemporaries did not treat the question of religious allegiance as seriously or as systematically as we might have wished. Even so, it was a subject which caught the attention of a number of commentators; in particular, as we might expect, that of the evangelicals themselves. In many cases their opinion was thoroughly 'revisionist'. Repeatedly they claimed that evangelical sympathisers were very rare creatures, and that most English people remained resolutely conservative. In 1539 George Constantine lamented that although the Gospel was openly preached:

[10] Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 380; Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), 507–8; Alsop, 'Religious preambles', 20–2.

[11] Ward, 'Reformation in Colchester', 87–8; David Marcombe, *English Small Town Life: Retford 1520–1642* (Nottingham, 1993), 221–2.

[12] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 504–5; G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge, 1972), 67–71.

[13] Clive Burgess, 'Late medieval wills and pious convention: testamentary evidence reconsidered', *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, ed. Michael Hicks (Gloucester, 1990), 15–18.

[14] Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 383. [15] Elton, *Policy and Police*, viii.

How unthankfully, how rebelliously, how carnally and unwillingly do we receive it! Who is there almost that will have a Bible, but he must be compelled thereto? How loath be our priests to teach the commandments, the articles of the faith, and the Paternoster in English! Again, how unwilling the people to learn it! Yea, they jest at it, calling it the new Paternoster and new learning.[16]

The publisher John Gough agreed that the common people were 'full of hatred and malice . . . against this most holy word and the lovers therof'.[17] Gough's pessimism was echoed by his most prolific author, the evangelical cleric Thomas Becon. In 1541–2 Becon wrote that, while there was an English Bible in every church:

how many read it? Verily, a man may come into some churches and see the Bible so enclosed and wrapped about with dust, even as the pulpit in like manner is both with dust and cobwebs, that with his finger he may write upon the Bible this epitaph: *Ecce nunc in pulvere dormio.*[18]

Indeed, his assessment has a note of bitterness which perhaps reflects his experience as a parish priest in Norfolk:

If they have a ghostly and learned curate . . . him they do hate, they wish the pulpit a coalpit. They think it a hundred years, if he preacheth but half an hour, so little pleasure have these assheads in hearing the glorious and blessed word of God.[19]

A London evangelical writing during 1543–6 gave the mirror image to Becon's lament, describing the continued influence of traditionalist priests in the country at large. He painted a vivid picture of such a priest coming to the house where his people were gathered on a holy day, when they are:

at the hottest in their ale. One biddeth Master Parson welcome; off goeth every man's cap. 'Come hither, Sir John!' 'To me!', saith another; and well is he that can soonest get a chair and a cushion to the highest end of the table for the priest to sit in.

He even ventured to put numbers to the question, claiming (with slightly shaky syntax) that reformers and conservatives were 'two parts

[16] 'A Memorial from George Constantine to Thomas Lord Cromwell', *Archaeologia* 23 (1831), 59.
[17] John Gough, *The dore of holy scripture* (1540), A5v-6v.
[18] 'See, I am sleeping in the dust.' Thomas Becon, *Newes out of heauen* (1542), A6r-v; cf. Job 7: 21.
[19] Becon, *Newes out of heauen*, A8r. Cf. Becon's *The new pollecye of warre* (1542), I1r; and his *A new yeares gyfte more precious than golde* (1543), E8r.

far unequal, for the tenth man in London, neither the hundredth man in the whole realm, knoweth not the gospel'.[20] The view that the evangelical message had made few converts and many enemies was the reformers' conventional wisdom.

It is a view that should be treated with caution, however, as is suggested by a reformist polemic from 1546 which argued that the monasteries still held a special place in English hearts. If the king were to restore even one monastery, so permitting others to do the same, then, it suggested:

> you should easily perceive which way they are bent. We doubt not but for these seven years following, masons' occupation, with other belonging to building, would be the best handicrafts within this your realm.[21]

This should warn us against taking such reformist doomsaying too seriously. Within ten years of this tract monasticism was indeed restored, and the response was far less enthusiastic than this author predicted. Evangelicals conceived of themselves as an exclusive minority whether or not this was true. They used such gloomy depictions of their circumstances as a polemical weapon, in order to stir their audiences to action. Elizabethan and Jacobean Protestants continued to speak of their following as a tiny minority, by which they meant not that the mass of the people were actual Catholics, but that their adherence to Protestantism was insufficiently deep.[22] Moreover, reformers and conservatives shared a rhetoric in which denunciations of the impiety of the masses were little more than a mannerism. It is unsurprising that those historians who have emphasised the strength of popular conservatism in these years have been tempted to quote statements such as John Hooper's claim in 1546 that traditional ceremonial was 'never before held by the people as of greater value than at the present', but to take such hyperbolic rhetoric at face value is not really sustainable.[23]

Indeed, just as reformist writers tended to emphasise popular conservatism, so traditionalists warned of popular support for heresy. The most excitable and least reliable conservatives were the foreign ambassadors in London: good Catholics willing to be shocked, and often ill-informed. The Imperial ambassador van der Delft's claim in 1549 that 'the common

[20] BL Royal MS 17.B.xxxv, 9r, 10v. [21] *A supplication of the poore Commons* (1546), A8r.

[22] Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982), 189–91, 200–2; Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 1993), 100–8.

[23] *Epistolae Tigurinae de rebus potissimum ad ecclesiae Anglicanae reformationem* (PS, 1848), 23 (my translation; cf. *Original Letters relative to the English Reformation*, ed. H. Robinson (2 vols., PS, 1846–7), i.36); Haigh, *English Reformations*, 158.

people are badly infected' should not be ignored, but for van der Delft even a small minority would constitute a serious infection.[24] Yet English conservatives agreed. The balladeer Thomas Smith wrote in 1540 that heresy was more deeply rooted than he had feared:

> Of late I well trusted, they had been over blown
> But now I well perceive, that neither favour nor smart
> From the body can expel, that is rooted in the heart.[25]

Soon afterwards, another poet – John Huntingdon, himself soon to convert to reforming ideas – wrote of reformers as being far commoner than they appeared:

> For without doubt
> There is a rout
> Of these same sleepers
> And corner creepers
> That bear a fair face
> In every place.[26]

Conservative preachers lamented the unorthodoxy of their audiences. William Chedsay feared in 1544 that 'the devil hath marked the greater part to him, and putteth Christ to the smaller', and Cuthbert Scott preached in the same year that:

> the lay people do grudge against the clergy, disdaining to be taught of them, challenging unto themselves a more perfect knowledge in scripture then the other have, and say that the mysteries of scriptures be opened unto them, by I cannot tell what spirit.[27]

William Peryn's ostensible reason for publishing his sermons defending the mass was that heresy had 'crept secretly in to the hearts of many of the younger and carnal sort'. He decided to act when he saw that 'this dangerous contagion drew toward none end, but rather seemed to take secretly force and strength, and was likely to fasten daily upon more and more'.[28]

[24] *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1547–1549*, ed. M. A. S. Hume and Royall Tyler (1912), 463. Cf. MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, 107–9.

[25] Thomas Smith, *A lytell treatyse agaynst sedicyous persons* (1540).

[26] Reprinted in John Bale, *A Mysterye of inyquyte contayned within the heretycall Genealogye of Ponce Pantolabus* (Antwerp, 1545), 71r.

[27] William Chedsay and Cuthert Scott, *Two notable sermones lately preached at Pauls crosse* (1545), D8v, H7r.

[28] William Peryn, *Thre godlye and notable sermons, of the sacrament of the aulter* (1546), *2v-3r.

Looking back from Mary's reign, Miles Huggarde agreed that 'a great part of this realm', in particular 'the vulgar people', had been allured by the reformers' doctrines.[29] In 1557 the veteran Bristol preacher Roger Edgeworth wrote that during his twenty-year preaching career, heresies:

> had so sore infected the Christian flock . . . that the king's majesty, and all the catholic clerks in the realm had much ado to extinguish them, which yet they could not so perfectly quench, but that ever still . . . they burst out afresh, even like fire hid under chaff, which sometimes among will flame out and do hurt if it be not looked to.[30]

Both conservatives and reformers saw their enemies more clearly than their friends – or, when convenient, professed to do so.

However, there are more level-headed and circumstantial contemporary assessments of the shifts in the religious divisions in these years. In 1532 Thomas More, not usually a man to play down the threat of heresy, described the hard core of reformers as 'a few ungracious folk'.[31] Political support gave their ideas a chance to spread, but this did not happen overnight. In 1533 Hugh Latimer's preaching in Bristol caused uproar, but he does not seem to have won many converts. One of his partisans there claimed that he could raise 400 signatures in Latimer's defence, but when put to the test only managed 25. Latimer's opponent William Hubberdine – another man not given to understatement – apparently put the number of heretics in Bristol no higher than thirty.[32] A decade later the mood was shifting. For all his despair, Thomas Becon admitted in 1542 that the common people were learning the Commandments, the Creed and the Pater Noster in English, and that 'many savour Christ aright, and daily the number increaseth'.[33] Likewise, in 1539 Richard Morison wrote that 'the people begin to know what they that be curates ought to preach, and what they are bound to follow, and yet they do but begin'.[34] By 1543 the veteran evangelical George Joye was writing, as if it were surprising, that 'thou shalt find even among the people many that abhor and detest these said holy popes' decrees, laws etc.,

[29] Miles Huggarde, *The displaying of the protestantes, with a description of diuers their abuses* (1556), 6r, 7r, 93v, 95r-v.

[30] Roger Edgeworth, *Sermons very fruitfull, godly and learned: preaching in the Reformation c. 1535–c. 1553*, ed. Janet Wilson (Cambridge, 1993), 95.

[31] Thomas More, *The confutacyon of Tyndales answere* (1532), Bb2v.

[32] Martha C. Skeeters, *Community and Clergy: Bristol and the Reformation, c. 1530–c. 1570* (Oxford, 1993), 43.

[33] Thomas Becon, *A newe pathway vnto praier, ful of much godly frute and christen knowledge* (1542), R5r.

[34] Richard Morison, *An invective ayenste the great and detestable vice, treason* (1539), D6r.

as rotten, stinking running sores'.[35] In the following year John Bale alleged that the 'lousy legerdemain' of the clergy 'is almost perceived of all men'. Bale was also confident that the sporadic persecution during these years strengthened the reformist cause: Anne Askew's martyrdom, he asserted hyperbolically, had converted a thousand people from popery.[36] A decade later Huggarde agreed that martyrdom was capable of stirring up considerable dissent, describing with contempt the 'brainsick fools' who cried out encouragement in the streets as Protestants were being taken to the stake, and who attended executions in huge numbers to be outraged and edified.[37]

In other words, if the reformers' numbers remained small, they remained confident that the tide was moving in their direction. Morison even believed that England's conservative heartlands were ripe for conversion. Arguing in 1539 that there was a backlash against the Pilgrimage of Grace, he claimed, 'I have heard divers men say, that three or four preachers may do more good in the north country in two or three months, than hath been done in these south parts, these two or three years.'[38]

Perhaps this was wishful thinking. Yet several reports tend to confirm his point. In the same year John Marshall wrote a series of reports on the state of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire which depict a population thoroughly pacified. 'The commons', he wrote, 'say it is a good world, for the poor men may now live in peace by the great men, for now (thank God) their great ruffling is past.' In addition, he claimed that the people were responding surprisingly positively to the changes in religion and, despite some initial opposition, were warming to the new English texts of the Pater Noster and the Creed.[39] Other conservative regions displayed the same benevolent curiosity. Latimer's early preaching tours may not have won many converts, but they certainly drew crowds. When one open-air sermon in Exeter was interrupted by rain, his substantial audience apparently refused to disperse and stayed to hear him out.[40] Even the abrasive William Barlow, bishop of the Welsh diocese of

[35] George Joye, *Our sauiour Iesus Christ hath not ouercharged his chirche with many ceremonies* (Antwerp, 1543), A2v.

[36] John Bale, *The epistle exhortatorye of an Englyshe Christiane unto his derely beloued contraye of Englande* (Antwerp, 1544), 5r; Anne Askew and John Bale, *The first examinacyon of Anne Askew, latelye martyred in Smythfelde* (Wesel, 1546), 43r.

[37] Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 43r, 49r-v.

[38] Morison, *Invective ayenste treason*, D7r.

[39] PRO SP 1/143, 81r (*LP* XIV (i) 295); SP 1/150, 187r (*LP* XIV (i) 839).

[40] Devon Record Office, ECA Book 51, 342r.

St David's, conceded in 1538 that his people were receptive to the reformist gospel:

> The people, now sensibly seeing the long obscured verity manifestly to display her brightness, whereby their inveterate accustomed superstition apparently detected, all popish delusions shall soon be defaced.[41]

This optimism was echoed by Becon after an extended visit to Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the mid-1540s. The East Anglian boy clearly regarded venturing into the Peak District as stepping beyond the bounds of civilisation. When he wrote an account of his travels in a fictionalised dialogue in 1550 he had the other characters ask, 'Into the Peak? Lord God, what made you there?... I think you found there very peakish people.' But in the event he was pleasantly surprised. Although the area was dominated by 'popish pedlary', 'the people where I have travelled, for the most part, are reasonable and quiet enough, yea and very conformable to God's truth. If any be stubbornly obstinate, it is for fault of knowledge.'

Staffordshire, he added, 'savoured somewhat more of pure religion', because travellers passing through the region had brought with them ideas and books from the south-east. Indeed, Becon wrote, one Derbyshire magnate who sheltered him owned a solid library of English evangelical texts, including works by Tyndale and Frith as well as (we are told with some satisfaction) Becon's own complete works.[42] Such books were clearly available well beyond London.

If remote regions had the potential for reform, unmistakable evangelical support was visible in other areas. In London the preacher Robert Wisdom blamed his arrest in 1543 on clergy alarmed by his popular following. According to Wisdom, the bishop of Hereford had said that 'great resort was to my sermons, rather than to others, better learned than I, that had not half the audience'. Wisdom smugly summed up his opponents' view of him as follows: 'Lo, all the world goeth after him. What shall we do? This fellow hath an exceeding audience. If we let him alone thus, all will believe him.'[43]

Wisdom's impartiality is certainly open to question; but an order of the Court of Aldermen in the same year that two of the sheriff of London's men should attend every sermon at Paul's Cross suggests

[41] BL Cotton MS Cleopatra E.iv, 316r.
[42] Thomas Becon, *The iewell of ioye* (1550), B7v, C1v, C3r-4v, C8r.
[43] BL Harleian MS 425, 7v. Cf. ECL MS 261, 91r.

genuine concern about the size of crowds at sermons, and the consequent potential for public disorder.[44] It was not a new problem: conservatives had shown periodic concern about violence and other disturbances during sermons in London since 1540.[45] Most reformist protest, however, was of a more subtle nature. About a third of the lay people arrested in the last, abortive attempt at a universal purge of heretics in London in 1540 were charged with failing to attend their parish churches or with irreverence in church.[46] In 1537 the London conservative Rowland Phillips claimed that there were many who 'in mass do use to clap their finger upon their lips and say never a word'.[47]

It was not only in London that such problems could be found. The heretical seed which Latimer had sown in Bristol grew quickly. In 1537 it was reported that one Bristol priest's failure to pray for the king during the Pilgrimage of Grace had offended 'all the parishioners'. This was an exaggeration, but his parish was clearly divided, with the reformers apparently in a majority. Indeed, passions had risen to such a point that the priest himself had been physically attacked. He was charged with saying that:

> he had not his black face for nothing. . . . For all that they be twenty-seven with a captain, and I have but seven of the old fashion with me, I trust some honest men and women will take my part.[48]

There were similar divisions in Gloucester, where an impromptu reformist sermon in 1540 was met with 'murmur' and 'unquietness' rather than outrage and disbelief.[49] Seven years later an evangelical preacher visiting Salisbury also found noticeable support, financial as well as numerical, from the townspeople.[50] In Kent in 1543 the reformers themselves boasted of their numerical strength. In May of that year, the parson of Wychling is said not only to have reviled a neighbouring priest as 'a false heretic and a popish knave', but to have added a threat: 'I shall make forty in the parish of Doddington to

[44] Corporation of London Record Office, Repertory 11, 13v. There were similar problems in Norfolk; see 'Great Yarmouth assembly minutes 1538–1545', ed. P. Rutledge, *Norfolk Record Society* 39 (1970), 38.

[45] Charles Wriothesley, *A Chronicle of England during the Reigns of the Tudors*, ed. W. Hamilton, vol. 1 (Camden Society n.s. 11, 1875), 115; Guildhall Library, London, MS 9531/12, 40r.

[46] *AM* (1570), 1376–80.

[47] *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. J. E. Cox (PS, 1846), 339.

[48] PRO SP 1/119, 192v-193r (*LP* XII (i) 1147).

[49] Worcester County Record Office, MS BA 2764/802, 137.

[50] *Reformation Narratives*, 74–6.

bark at thee, and I shall make ten thousand of my set against thee in Kent.'[51]

We do not need to take such numbers literally to recognise the confidence that reformist support in Kent was significant and widespread. Likewise, down the coast in Brighton the parish priest lamented during the 1540s that 'in this town . . . many a rude person sticketh not to call a priest knave', and insisted that this was not simple anticlericalism but rather 'new learning and lately crept up'.[52] Even in the most reformist areas, however, widespread sympathy for reform did not equate to majority support. In 1539 the evangelical Anthony Pickering was forced to temper his optimism with realism as he wrote that 'there is of both sorts in London . . . but I trust the most part good; or else I would they were good, as knoweth our Lord'.[53] A reformist majority was not unthinkable, but it was a long way off.

In 1545 the botanist and radical polemicist William Turner responded to Bishop Gardiner's allegation that the realm was essentially at peace within itself with one of the longest contemporary analyses of the state of the religious parties. Gardiner could not have been more wrong, he argued:

> The third part of the realm dissenteth from the other two parts in the cause of religion. There are ten thousand and more honest men in England which in their consciences dissent from you, and hate with all their hearts your false doctrine. . . . There is not a city nor a great town in all England wherein are not many that dissent from you in doctrine and would openly speak against you if they durst.

In addition, 'the most part' of scholars of the universities 'which have been brought up in the bosom of the holy scripture' despised traditional ceremonial. The one great bastion of conservatism, he claimed, remained the nongraduate clergy who held the vast majority of English curacies.[54] This was, no doubt, partly mere snobbery, but many reformers seem to have been cold-shouldered by clerical neighbours. Turner wrote:

> If a preacher comes from Oxford or Cambridge, freely to preach the word of God to the people, and requires to be heard, the priest uses to give this answer to the preacher, if he smell anything of the new learning: 'We must this day read

[51] CCCC MS 128, 84 (*LP* XVIII (ii) 546, p. 316).
[52] PRO SP 1/244, 139r (*LP* Addenda 1597).
[53] PRO SP 1/143, 72r (*LP* XIV (i) 283).
[54] William Turner, *The rescuynge of the romishe fox* (Bonn, 1545), A8r-v.

the Six Articles, otherwise called Gardiner's Gospel', and so the preacher goeth away.[55]

Likewise, in an unpublished tract, Richard Morison deplored the clergy who justified their refusal to preach against the pope on the grounds that 'since your Majesty hath abolished him, the people need not talk of him, but if they would hold their tongues, every man would soon forget him.' Morison was surely right to see such an approach as disingenuous.[56] Such minimal obedience seems to have been common practice among the clergy. Even in Kent there were repeated claims that only Archbishop Cranmer's appointees were preaching the gospel and obeying the royal injunctions.[57] At the other end of the country, Bishop Bird of Chester – by no means a hot-gospeller – was shocked by the extent of noncompliance from his clergy.[58] To enforce the injunctions, a London reformer claimed, was to risk an accusation of heresy.[59] Indeed, a 1546 tract claimed that the clergy had deliberately ignored the official English Primer, issued the previous year, which was ambivalent towards the cult of the saints and prayers for the dead. By contrast, this author argued, should any new official publication seem to favour traditional religion, 'it shall be swung in every pulpit, with, "This is the king's gracious will, and yet these heretics will be still doing in the Scriptures."'[60] By November 1546, according to Richard Cox, conservative clergy were actually burning official publications such as the Primer and the *King's Book* of 1543, using as a justification the general purge against heretical books which followed the proclamation in August of that year.[61]

Even among the nongraduate clergy, however, there are indications that Turner's picture of massed ranks of traditionalists is an oversimplification. Becon was as critical of the clergy as the next evangelical, but he characterised their traditionalism as being motivated not by loyalty to Rome but by simple sluggardliness and self-interest:

God saith: Lift up thy voice as a trump. But they say, whist, not a word, unless we be suspect to be fellows of the new learning. . . . It is good sleeping in a whole skin. He is not wise that will cast himself into trouble when he may live in rest.[62]

[55] Turner, *Rescuynge*, A6v-7r.
[56] BL Cotton MS Faustina C.ii, 15r. I am grateful to John Jackson and John Cooper for this reference.
[57] PRO SP 1/152, 2r (*LP* XIV (i) 1053); SP 1/160, 5r (*LP* XV 645).
[58] PRO SP 1/168, 8r (*LP* XVI 1377). [59] BL Royal MS 17.B.xxxv, 8v.
[60] *Supplication of the poore Commons*, A7v. [61] PRO SP 1/226, 16r (*LP* XXI (ii) 321).
[62] Thomas Becon, *An Inuectyue agenst the moste wicked & detestable vice of swearing* (1543), 4r.

Becon had nothing but contempt for this attitude, but he clearly believed that only pragmatic considerations prevented many clergy from openly siding with reform. Beyond the ranks of the committed stood what was probably a larger number of sympathetic onlookers. George Joye was also convinced in the 1540s that such conformism was widespread. While he deplored fainthearts 'that will not believe the gospel till they see every man agree thereupon', he was willing to accept that in some circumstances indecision was understandable:

> There be yet many of us which have not heard the gospel openly and freely preached which bear good zeal thereto, but yet are they but tender and weak, and not waxen so strong branches in the vineyard of Christ as some others be: which must with great diligence, cure and study be planted, watered and rooted with continual reading and teaching till they be strong and constant.[63]

One particular consideration which restrained such people from giving their open support to reform, Joye felt, was the need for public unity in religion, and he appealed to:

> the learned and prudent, which yet for the study and zeal of peace . . . would appear to abhor and eschew these new fashions and sudden mutations (as they call them). . . lest their rashness (as they pretend it) should confirm the enemies of the gospel. Therefore decree they thus to stand still . . . looking upon and beholding the brunt of the battle, no hands putting forth, nor yet once (when they might) to help any amendment or reformation. But the matter is too manifest and too far gone.[64]

Similarly, John Bale chided the 'soft wits' who felt that his polemic was too violent.[65]

If reformers were impatient that such temporisers dragged their feet, conservatives were thoroughly alarmed by their readiness to dally with evangelical ideas. William Peryn's avowed aim in preaching was to 'reclaim . . . such as were not too far gone' in heresy, rather than to reconvert obstinate opponents.[66] One of the most disturbing manifestations of this phenomenon was a widespread reluctance to support vigorous prosecution of the heresy laws.[67] In 1546 the conservative scholar and

[63] George Joye, *A present consolation for the sufferers of persecucion for ryghtuysenes* (Antwerp, 1544), B2v, C7r-v.

[64] George Joye, *The exposicion of Daniel the Prophete* (Antwerp, 1545), 210r-v.

[65] Askew and Bale, *The first examinacyon*, 44r. [66] Peryn, *Thre godlye sermons*, *3r-v.

[67] See, for example, *AM*, 1202; Askew and Bale, *The first examinacyon*, 37v; Muriel McClendon, *The Quiet Reformation: magistrates and the emergence of Protestantism in Tudor Norwich* (Stanford, 1999), 14–5.

polemicist Richard Smith was horrified by the indulgent approach which many took towards evangelicals:

> laughing merely for pastime at their sayings, reading very gladly their very naughty and railing, pestiferous books and writings, without rebuke or controlment of them, and advancing some of them to right honest and good promotions.[68]

Moderation of this kind was to become increasingly difficult as confessional identities hardened in the decades to come, and the sectarian historians of both sides shared an interest in writing such compromisers out of the record.[69] Nevertheless, it seems likely that by Edward VI's reign this fringe of 'soft', uncommitted reformers and reformist sympathisers was numerically significant; certainly far more than Turner's figure of 10,000 committed evangelicals, and possibly as many as his other guess of a third of the nation.

III

If we can tentatively conclude that a significant minority of English people became sympathetic, on a range of levels, to novel religious views, it is less easy to understand why this might have happened. The clearest achievement of so-called 'revisionism' has been to demonstrate that the English did not see themselves as groaning under a papal yoke in the generations before the Reformation. If English Protestantism had not existed, it would not have been necessary to invent it. Yet if the evangelical movement was not rooted in a pre-existing dissatisfaction with traditional religion, it becomes harder to explain how this decidedly nontraditional religion managed to establish a mass following of any kind within a generation of its arrival in England.

Part of the answer to this question must be logistical. The reformist message was being spread by some extraordinarily able preachers; and as A. G. Dickens has pointed out, in a country whose entire population was comparable to that of Wales today, such individuals might have more influence than we would be inclined to ascribe to them.[70] They seem to have had some success in turning the sermon into a form of mass entertainment.[71] The power of a sermon could be strongly reinforced

[68] Richard Smith, *The assertion and defence of the sacramente of the aulter* (1546), 10v.
[69] Andrew Pettegree, *Marian Protestantism: Six Studies* (Aldershot, 1996), 86–117.
[70] Dickens, 'Early expansion of Protestantism', 93.
[71] Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 86v-87r.

by visual displays such as iconoclasm: the exposure and destruction of allegedly fraudulent relics before an audience seems to have been particularly effective.[72] In this period reformers were also eager to use the stage to spread their message.[73] In addition, of course, evangelicals produced a flood of printed religious polemic, to which conservatives were woefully slow to respond.[74] English evangelicals managed to disseminate their message remarkably quickly, through a remarkable range of media, against remarkably little organised opposition. This did not guarantee that that message would be well received, but it was perhaps a necessary condition for its success.

To most contemporaries, however, such functional approaches to the spread of the new ideas would seem to miss the point; as would the suggestion that popular dissatisfaction with the pre-Reformation church might have predisposed the English towards heresy. Both evangelical and conservative partisans at the time would have preferred to explain the change in religious rather than social terms. If moderns have focused on explaining the fertility or otherwise of the soil on to which the evangelical seed fell, contemporaries paid more attention to the intrinsic power of the seed itself, for good or ill. Reformers, of course, argued that through the preaching of the true gospel God had opened their eyes.[75] Yet conservatives agreed that evangelical preaching was at the root of the problem of heresy, and were quite clear as to how it had succeeded in inflicting such deep wounds on traditional religious practice. For Miles Huggarde the difference between the Catholic message and that of the reformers was that between the narrow and broad roads:

> The one exhorteth all men to bear Christ's cross, in hard life, trouble, and affliction: the other persuadeth to embrace liberty, belly-cheer, and all pleasure. . . . The one subjugateth the affections: the other unbridleth the appetites.[76]

This is obviously polemical, but the charge that the evangelicals attracted converts or sympathisers through promising 'liberty' should not be dismissed. It was a claim which conservatives made repeatedly and at length. At times it was no more than a way of accusing their opponents of loose morals. Bishop Gardiner threw back at the reformers the oft-cited example of the penitent thief on the cross, claiming that they wished

[72] Peter Marshall, 'The rood of Boxley, the blood of Hailes and the defence of the Henrician Church', *JEH* 46 (1995), 689–96; *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish, 1547–1549*, 219–20.

[73] Ruth Blackburn, *Biblical Drama under the Tudors* (The Hague, 1971).

[74] See Andrew Pettegree's essay in this volume.

[75] See Peter Marshall's essay in this volume.

[76] Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 34v-35r.

to follow his example by living an immoral life then repenting at the last minute.[77] The Christian freedom which the reformers claimed was merely 'carnal liberty'.[78] However, there was more to this than simple insult. In 1552–3 Roger Edgeworth claimed that in his congregation there were:

> a great many I am sure, that would haue said once within these twenty years, that no man living, no, nor an angel of heaven or all the devils in hell, should never have perverted you from the sure affiance and fast faith that you had toward the blessed sacraments of the church. But after that there came among you a great multitude of pleasant preachers, preaching liberty, and so pleasures following of such lewd liberty: how soon you have been overthrown and turned another way.[79]

The throwaway accusation of 'lewd liberty' cannot conceal his genuine dismay that the words of the 'pleasant preachers' had seduced his flock from the truth. Other conservatives agreed that those who came preaching justification by faith alone were all too persuasive. In 1540 John Standish described the doctrine as 'venom . . . which to the taste seemeth sweet and delicious'. Richard Smith and Miles Huggarde used very similar terms. Even Gardiner admitted that the doctrine had 'a marvellous appearance of plainness'.[80] He complained that, 'in a miserable state of iniquity and sin, some would have nothing preached but mercy, with only Christ, and how he beareth all sin, payeth all, purgeth all, and cleanseth all'.[81]

Of course evangelical preachers were popular, he argued: their theme was always forgiveness, and never sin.

The accusation that evangelical doctrine fostered a lax attitude to sin may be unjust, but many evangelicals took it extremely seriously. Almost every reformist treatment of justification during this period included a denunciation of the 'gross gospellers' who abused evangelical liberty.[82]

[77] Stephen Gardiner, *A declaration of such true articles as George Ioye hath gone about to confute as false* (1546), 50v; cf. Luke 23: 39–43.

[78] Edgeworth, *Sermons*, 127; CCCC MS 128, 10 (*LP* XVIII (ii) 546, p. 292); Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 22v. For the potency of this charge of 'carnal liberty', see also Thomas Freeman's essay in this volume.

[79] Edgeworth, *Sermons*, 364.

[80] John Standish, *A lytle treatise against the protestacion of Robert Barnes* (1540), C2r; Richard Smith, *A defence of the blessed masse, and the sacrifice therof* (1546), 13v; Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 113v; Gardiner, *Declaration of such true articles*, 267v.

[81] Stephen Gardiner, *A detection of the Deuils Sophistrie* (1546), 114v.

[82] See for example Thomas Becon, *A Christmas bankette* (1542), O4v; Richard Tracy, *The profe and declaration of thys proposition: Fayth only iustifieth* (1543), D3r-4r; Katherine Parr, *The Lamentacion of a Sinner* (1547), F1r-v.

Although couched in vague terms, these passages clearly aimed to describe real people rather than a hypothetical problem. I know of no case of an evangelical denying that such people existed; and occasionally they were more precise. Thomas Becon's 1550 tract, *The fortress of the faithful*, was a response to the rebellions of the previous year, which he blamed mainly on seditious papists. However, he apparently felt he could not dodge the charge that it was reformers, preaching 'indiscreet sermons', who had provoked the rising in Norfolk. Such preachers, rumour alleged, had 'caused the common people to aspire and breathe unto carnal liberty'. Remarkably, Becon did not attempt to deny this, stating instead that:

> I will not excuse all preachers. For some, as I have heard, have taken upon them the office of preaching uncalled, unsent, and such disordered preachers for the most part, bring all things to a disorder, yea to an utter confusion.

However, he argued at length that those whom he called 'godly preachers' could not be blamed and had been cruelly slandered. He asked, 'Can the sermons of them which teach all obedience, humility, and patience, move men unto disobedience, haughtiness of mind, and desire of revenging?'[83] It is not the most convincing defence. The implication is not merely that reformist preachers were up to their necks in the risings in the south-east in 1549, including the one in Norfolk that developed into open rebellion.[84] This rare glimpse of the world of disreputable evangelicalism suggests that the conservative accusations were not unfounded. If a partisan as biased as Becon was forced to concede that there were reformers who tended towards libertinism, and that their audiences were ready to hear and act on this message, we may perhaps believe him.

However, the accusation that the reformers preached liberty did not simply mean that they were immoral. For most reformers evangelical liberty meant liberty from the ceremonial, ritual and regulation of traditional religion. They attacked customs which were a powerful social lubricant as superstitions, and in so doing attempted to redefine social morality. It is clear that this was deeply shocking to many people. Yet such challenges to the legitimacy of time-honoured practices can be hard to resist if they once establish themselves in a society, as the shifts in social

[83] Thomas Becon, *The fortresse of the faythfull* (1550), D1 v-8v.

[84] It has in any case become increasingly clear that these risings, although largely secular, had an evangelical tinge to them. Ethan Shagan, 'Protector Somerset and the 1549 rebellions: new sources and new perspectives', *EHR* 114 (1999); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a Life* (New Haven and London, 1996), 432–8.

morality during the twentieth century show. It is well known that many English people whose religious conservatism was impeccable joined in the plunder of monastic property once it had become clear that the plunder was going to go ahead in any case. Likewise, as traditional practices were eroded, abandoning them looked steadily less revolutionary and more pragmatic. In the four years after clerical marriage was legalised in 1549, some 15 per cent of English parish clergy married. It would be foolhardy to suggest that they married because they were evangelical sympathisers.[85] Yet one might well drift into evangelical sympathies as a consequence of marriage; for significant areas of traditional religious practice were widely seen as incompatible with clerical marriage,[86] while the reformers defended and justified it.

Evangelicalism laid a similar trap for the laity by its rejection of set fasts. In the Swiss Reformation Lent-breaking had been a revolutionary act. In England Lent was not so much broken as whittled away. From 1538 the Lenten fast was partially relaxed by the crown, ostensibly on purely pragmatic grounds.[87] By Edward VI's reign traditional fasts were being justified simply as a gesture of support for the fishing industry.[88] Not all English people were quick to take advantage of the new freedoms, but those who stuck to the old rules must have seemed increasingly quixotic.[89] John Feckenham lamented in 1547 that those who still observed fasts were ridiculed.[90] All the while, evangelicals were insisting that fast days could simply be ignored. It was an extremely simple message, and one with an obvious and immediate appeal. As early as the late 1530s Roger Edgeworth was alarmed by how quickly this insidious idea had spread in Bristol, yet there was little he could say to stop it. He tried to associate fast-breaking with incest, but few can have been persuaded.[91] By the 1540s Lent-breaking was an endemic problem across the kingdom.[92]

When Miles Huggarde denounced Protestants as libertines in 1556, the specific areas he singled out as evidence of this were Protestant opposition

[85] Parish, *Clerical Marriage*, 198–217. [86] Ibid., 161–79.

[87] *Tudor Royal Proclamations 1485–1553*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven, 1964), i. 260–61.

[88] *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts existing in the archives and collections of Venice . . . 1534–1554*, ed. Rawdon Brown (1873), 347.

[89] PRO SP 1/150, 187r (*LP* XIV (i) 839). [90] PRO SP 1/228, 55v (*LP* XXI (ii) 710).

[91] Edgeworth, *Sermons*, 128.

[92] See, among many examples, *APC* i. 104–6, 114–5; CCCC MS 128, 45, 72 (*LP* XVIII (ii) 546, pp. 306, 312); PRO SP 1/146, 252r-v (*LP* XIV (i) 684), SP 1/176, 156r (*LP* XVIII (i) 327); Corporation of London Record Office, Repertory 10, 90v, 169v, 324v, Repertory 11, 176r; *AM* (1570), 1376, 1378.

to clerical celibacy and opposition to fasting. Sermons against fasting, he suggested, had been received as a 'pleasant matter', as well they might have been.[93] Bishop Gardiner's lament in 1546 that the reformers' ideas appealed to a wide section of people rings true:

> You promise them liberty of all things. . . . You flatter the covetous master with pulling away holy days, that he may have the more work done him for his year's wages. You flatter again the servant with pulling away all opinion of fast by abstinence from any meat either in Lent or otherwise. You offer priests wives, to wit, and they can win them to you. You rid all of confession, and weeping for sin.[94]

It was the evangelicals' good fortune to be preaching against practices which could be maintained only by constant and conscious effort, and which made less and less sense as fewer and fewer people observed them. The offer of liberty was real. While we should beware believing the propaganda of either side, we should not allow such wariness to blind us to the real force which these ideas could have. Of course, one did not become an evangelical because one broke a fast, much less because one accepted official relaxation of fasts. However, by breaking a fast or abandoning any of these other traditional strictures one aligned one's life with those who were preaching in defence of what you had done and against those who had denounced it.

Attacks on fasting and celibacy, for all the impact they may have had, were hardly the heart of the evangelical message. However, it is arguable that one element which was far more central had a similar impact. From the beginning the reformers had suggested, with a devastating simplicity, that purgatory did not exist. The huge intercessory effort which was one of the organising principles of late medieval piety was dismissed simply as a confidence trick. As the blunt-speaking polemicist Henry Brinklow put it, prayers and masses for souls in purgatory 'availeth the dead no more than the pissing of a wren helpeth to cause the sea to flow at an extreme ebb'.[95] The argument which was put endlessly by evangelical authors and preachers was that purgatory was a sham, maintained by the clergy to line their own pockets and to distract good Christians from the truly charitable work of giving to the poor. Like most conspiracy theories, this must have seemed inherently improbable at first, but it had an insidious quality to it. The late medieval devotional system built around prayer for the dead depended, among other things, on a sense that the Church

93 Huggarde, *Displaying of the protestantes*, 30v. 94 Gardiner, *Declaration of such true articles*, 82r-v.
95 Henry Brinklow, *The Lamentacion of a Christian, against the Citie of London* (Bonn, 1542), A3v.

militant was united in communion with the Church triumphant. When it interceded for the dead, the Church spoke with one voice. The breaking of that unity by even a small dissenting minority gravely undermined the social legitimacy of such intercession. Henry VIII's successive attempts to circumscribe prayer for the dead only accelerated the process.

Diarmaid MacCulloch has suggested that many English people did indeed become convinced that the old Church had played them for fools.[96] In individual cases it is unclear whether this conviction precipitated a conversion to other evangelical views, or merely followed it. However, just as the evangelical message of liberty had an appeal that was more than merely doctrinal, so the evangelical attack on purgatory seems to have caused ripples among those who may not have been convinced by the theology behind it. Purgatory was not merely a doctrine but a living system of devotion, and one which required a great deal of effort and expense to maintain. From the mid-1530s onwards that system of devotion was under steady attack by Henry VIII's and Edward VI's regimes; and at the same time evangelicals were denouncing the entire system as fraudulent. Fear of endowments being seized; the niggling suspicion that the evangelicals might be right; and common sloth and avarice united to form a powerful alliance against spending time or money on intercession for the dead.

Roger Edgeworth's accusation that 'this opinion of no purgatory' is 'grounded on . . . carnal liberty' may be opportunist, but it is not implausible. Perhaps, as he argued, those who doubted purgatory hoped for repentance without penance.[97] It is equally likely that they were glad of an excuse not to spend significant amounts of their wealth on intercession. Patrick Collinson has compared the abolition of purgatory to the forcible closure of hospices for the terminally ill; this vividly conveys the extent to which it would have horrified those who continued to believe.[98] But unlike a hospice, purgatory is intangible. Faced with a choice between the bleak belief that souls are being abandoned to their torments by a society that has turned its back on them, and the more comforting alternative that no such torments exist, few people would have the moral courage to resist the lure of the latter. For many, purgatory might seem less like a hospice than like a contributory pension: a burden borne willingly for the community and for one's own future, but which could quickly become intolerable if a suspicion arose that no such provision

[96] MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant*, 115–6. [97] Edgeworth, *Sermons*, 128, 132.

[98] Patrick Collinson, 'England', *The Reformation in National Context*, ed. Robert Scribner, Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge, 1994), 88.

was needed, and that the contributions were merely lining the pockets of the salesmen.

Respectable evangelicals, of course, had no truck with such worldly or mixed motives. They went out of their way to distance themselves from the avarice, gluttony and lechery to which their doctrines could be seen as appealing. This was of course politically necessary, but it is safe to assume they meant it. We are familiar with their self-image as an elect minority, and with their readiness to fall out among themselves regardless of their wider circumstances. Yet from a historical point of view, this does not convince. The committed core of reformers may have been uncomfortable with the broader penumbra of sympathisers and opportunists, but that penumbra was an inseparable part of their movement. Most English people never experienced a dramatic, individual conversion; Protestant England was formed by pragmatic gospellers. Equally importantly, the presence of this reformist penumbra was deeply damaging to traditional religion and to its attempts at self-defence. The leaders of early evangelicalism were highly moral and responsible people. Nevertheless, their message had a dangerous, irresponsible, reckless appeal. While traditional religion offered community, responsibility, virtue, prudence and asceticism, evangelicalism offered liberty. It was an offer which gave the reformers allies they may not have wanted, yet that offer and those allies were important ingredients of their eventual success.

IV

By 1553, then, a small, noisy and well-documented minority of English people had clearly experienced a shift in religious identity towards evangelicalism which we might well call conversion; and a much larger and more amorphous body of people, although still clearly a minority, seem to have been attracted by evangelical preaching and writing such that their religion was no longer wholly traditional. This is not to try to reintroduce a 'Whig-Protestant' interpretation of the English Reformation by the back door. Rather, it is to suggest that religious change under Henry VIII and Edward VI cannot be understood simply as a process of changing Catholics into Protestants. The problem of allegiance remains, but must be addressed qualitatively as well as quantitatively. We may regret, with A. G. Dickens, that there is 'little prospect of establishing tolerably hard statistics concerning . . . even the rough percentage of the English population which at any stage [early Protestants]

attained'.[99] Living in an age of mass politics, we are accustomed to thinking in such terms. However, to attempt to compile such figures for early modern England is not merely futile – it is counterproductive.[100] The concentration on numerical support is misleading in a hierarchical society; and in such a society, to attempt to draw clear dividing lines is to mask the nature of religious change.

Committed reformers were undoubtedly a small minority. Yet it is less clear whether this matters, for in early modern Europe small minorities might have a vastly disproportionate influence. In France Huguenot allegiance at its height was perhaps one tenth of the population, yet the determined dissidence of this tiny minority was enough to sustain four decades of civil war.[101] The quality of dissidence mattered as much as the quantity, and quality can be measured in several ways. First, and simplest, is the level of commitment. One of the characteristic fallacies of a democratic age is the assumption that each individual has the same political weight. Yet revolutionaries have always known that a determined minority can overthrow a confused, divided or disorientated majority. As Rosemary O'Day has put it, 'cadres are decisive';[102] and the commitment of the evangelical cadres is not in doubt. The effectiveness of their propaganda; their refusal to compromise with opponents, especially after 1547; and their willingness to stamp out dissent among themselves all bear testimony to this.[103] Equally important was their conviction that providence was on their side. The day of the Lord, they insisted, was at hand.[104] The very persecution that they endured was the devil's last, desperate and doomed ploy; it was both a sign that the end was near, and the means by which they would attain victory.[105] A reformer burned in 1546 is said to have shouted as he was taken to the stake, 'Fight for your God; for he hath not long to continue.'[106] These are the kinds of prophecies which tend to become self-fulfilling.

However, the evangelicals had more than prophecy to fall back on. As minorities go, they were singularly well placed and well connected.

[99] Dickens, 'Early expansion of Protestantism', 89.

[100] Collinson, 'England', 83–84; O'Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 146.

[101] Mark Greengrass, *The French Reformation* (Oxford, 1987), 43.

[102] O'Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 146.

[103] See Thomas Freeman's essay in this volume.

[104] Thomas Becon, *A pleasaunt newe Nosegay* (1542), A7r; ECL MS 261, 114v.

[105] Joye, *Present consolation*, C6v; Joye, *The refutation of the byshop of Winchesters derke declaration of his false articles* (1546), 190r; John Bale, *Yet a course at the romyshe foxe* (Antwerp, 1543), 96v; Miles Coverdale, *A confutacion of that treatise, which one Iohn Standish made agaynst the protestacion of D. Barnes* (Zürich, 1541), C4r-v.

[106] *AM*, 1232.

Their strongholds were in the areas of the country which mattered politically – the south-east, East Anglia, the Thames valley, and towns rather than the countryside; their weakness in the north, the south-west and Wales may have been a cause for pastoral concern, but politically it was much less important. More significantly still, like their Huguenot counterparts a generation later, English evangelicals had friends in high places. Under Henry VIII, when their political favour was only ever partial, they had powerful patrons in Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell. Henry's diocesan bishops included nine clear evangelicals and several more fair-weather friends.[107] There were prominent evangelical sympathisers among the lay nobility, in successive parliaments and, especially, in royal service at court. Politically the patronage and influence of these men and women was worth more than any number of reformist converts in the 'dark corners of the land'. Moreover, evangelical influence had already reached deep into the universities, especially Cambridge.[108]

Under Edward VI, in addition to these advantages, the evangelicals found themselves in power, and able to use the machinery of the English state to further their aims. Perhaps this resembles a Reformation 'from above'; yet, as Nicholas Tyacke has pointed out, the distinction between 'above' and 'below' depends upon the straw man of truly 'popular' Reformation. This was a rarity across Europe, and was only likely to appear when political as well as religious authority was threatened. In a stable polity such as England, religious change could only ever be mediated through the existing structures of power, and in particular through the university and clerical elites.[109] To see 'above' and 'below' as opposites is to apply the standards of a democratic age to a hierarchical society; and to apply either label to this core of convinced reformers is misleading.

What, then, of broader public opinion? It is unclear how relevant the term is to early modern Europe. The concept of 'public opinion' presupposes a 'public' which believes it has a right to an opinion; and in mid-Tudor England this 'public' was a small proportion of the population. The beliefs and preferences of the people as a whole were usually irrelevant or marginal to politics. The potential power of their

[107] The nine were William Barlow, Thomas Cranmer, Edward Foxe, Thomas Goodricke, John Hilsey, Henry Holbeach, Robert Holgate, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Shaxton.

[108] Alec Ryrie, 'English evangelical reformers in the last years of Henry VIII', D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford (2000), 203–22.

[109] Nicholas Tyacke, 'Introduction', *England's Long Reformation 1500–1800*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (1998), 4–5.

numbers was considerable, but in practical terms nearly impossible to wield: mass rebellion is a blunt political instrument. This is not to argue that the people at large were unimportant. Rather, if we are to appreciate their place in events we need to see those events through their eyes. From the perspective of most English subjects, government was something one experienced, not something in which one participated. The normal opinion of the public was one of acquiescence and obedience. In such circumstances the people did not need to be persuaded that a proposed change was right, merely that it was inevitable. This is to an extent true of all societies, but in early modern England the population positively expected to have its opinions led in this fashion. As good subjects they had had obedience to the higher powers drummed into them; and as good Christians they trusted that providence would act through those powers. As such, their personal hopes and fears regarding the changes which they experienced usually mattered less than where they believed those changes to be going. If we are trying to assess mid-Tudor public opinion, the question of what the people wanted to happen is secondary to the question of what they believed was happening; for this, too, is the kind of prophecy that is inclined to be fulfilled.

This does not mean that the people would inevitably acquiesce in the destruction of traditional religion. In France the determination of the Huguenot minority could not achieve this, largely because the population was galvanised to believe that a Huguenot victory was neither inevitable nor favoured by God. In England, by contrast, the population was not called to the barricades. For the committed evangelicals the religious tensions were an apocalyptic conflict between the earthly representatives of Christ and Antichrist. It was a view shared by their fiercest opponents; by their successors, in particular the martyrologist John Foxe; and by many subsequent historians who have continued to see the Reformation era as one of trench warfare between Protestant and Catholic. Yet the reformers' achievement in mid-Tudor England is that this did not happen. Catholic England did not unite against them. There can be no doubt that the religious changes imposed on parish life under Henry VIII and Edward VI were profoundly disturbing to most English people.[110] However, their piecemeal nature, and their imposition in the king's name, meant that the response was not resistance but rather disunity, controversy and confusion. Such confusion was, it seems, only

[110] Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974), 240–2.

exacerbated by evangelical preaching. The *King's Book* of 1543 claimed that 'the heads and senses of our people have been much imbusied, and in these days travailed with the understanding' of doctrinal controversies.[111] Indeed, conservatives claimed that the reformers' gospel was 'the original of all dissension, schisms and contention', although, significantly, Henry VIII chose to share the blame equally between evangelical and traditionalist.[112] Whoever is to be blamed, by the 1540s all observers agreed that religious discord had become endemic.

One of the more well-known and memorable examples of this discord comes not from London's pulpits and printing presses, but from one of the most isolated and conservative places in England: Bodmin, in Cornwall, where there was a free school. According to a later account, not long before the 1549 rising:

> The scholars, who used customably to divide themselves for better exploiting their pastimes, grew therethrough into two factions, the one whereof they called the old religion, the other the new. This once begun, was prosecuted among them in all exercises, and now and then handled with some eagerness and roughness, each party knowing, and still keeping the same companions and captain. At last one of the boys converted the spill of an old candlestick into a gun, charged it with powder and stone, and (through mischance or ungraciousness) therewith killed a calf: whereupon the owner complained, the master whipped, and the division ended.[113]

The significance of this darkly comic episode is not that the school was genuinely torn by religious divisions, as some have argued.[114] Schoolboys' gangs have always been able to find names for themselves without taking on the causes behind them. The choice of the terms, old and new religion (if they date back to the boys themselves), indicates where their real religious sympathies lay.[115] The point is that even in so remote a region as this, the division between reformers and conservatives was the most obvious dispute on which the boys could model their gangs. By the time of Henry VIII's death, every adult in England and Wales would have been touched by the religious changes which he introduced, in some form or other, and most must at least have been aware of 'the new religion', of people who wished to take the process of change further.

[111] *A necessary doctrine and erudition for any christen man* (1543), A3r.
[112] Parr, *Lamentation*, F2v-3r; PRO SP 1/212, 112r (*LP* XX (ii) 1030).
[113] Richard Carew of Antony, *The Survey of Cornwall*, ed. F. E. Halliday (1953), 196.
[114] Dickens, *English Reformation*, 328; Palliser, 'Popular reactions', 107; Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1989), 235.
[115] Richard Rex, 'The New Learning', *JEH* 44 (1993), 26–44.

During the reign of Edward VI, both the impact of religious change, and the regime's zeal for more, would have become unavoidable. By then a good majority of the population probably had more detailed knowledge or experience of evangelicalism, through direct or indirect encounters with evangelical preachers or books, or through meeting with reformist sympathisers. Some may even have managed to absorb something from the official homilies. A minority – perhaps, in some areas, as many as William Turner's estimate of a third of the nation – were in sympathy with at least some of the reformers' ideas; a much smaller minority had become committed supporters. Another minority was passionately opposed to some or all of the reformers' changes. However, just as important as the presence of such committed groups was the fragmentation and dissension they engendered, and the confusion and uncertainty of most of the nation as to the future. This confusion was, of course, only exacerbated by the bewildering shifts in royal policy.

In such an atmosphere the position, influence and self-belief of the committed vanguard of reformers gave them a certain momentum. Their dominance of the religious scene was out of all proportion to their numbers. They had not converted the nation; indeed, they had scarcely begun, and by their own standards they would never succeed. But their achievement is nevertheless remarkable: by 1553 the English had come, like the schoolboys of Bodmin, to see themselves as a nation divided by religion.