

The long Reformation: conceptualisation and periodisation in English religious history between the 16th and 18th centuries*

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I

This invitation to give this paper came at an opportune moment, as I had just stepped down as Director of the Institute for Medieval and Early Modern Studies at Durham University. This role encouraged me to think about issues of periodisation more seriously than I had done previously. Indeed, despite holding a chair in ‘early modern history’, I did not really define my interests in terms of chronology. A colleague recently reminded me about one of the first meetings that I attended after my move to Durham in 2012. Its purpose was to discuss the naming of the Institute. I went along more or less entirely uninterested in the outcome. However, as the meeting progressed, I became more and more convinced that the name was important. The problem was that the reasons of more or less all of my colleagues who spoke only worked to persuade me that their preferred alternative should not be chosen. The choice seemed to me not to be about the best name, but about the least unsatisfactory. Reflecting on this experience highlights some important points about periodization – or, at least, reveals some of my own prejudices. Above all, it makes it clear that it is something that we, as a profession, do to ourselves.

This is very obviously the case with the ‘early modern’ period, which has established itself as probably the most common name in the Anglo-American academic world for the period which is more or less coterminous with the ‘long Reformation’ of my title. As has been noted by many commentators, while ‘early modern’ can be found in historical literature, particularly economic history, during the first half of the twentieth century, and its first recorded usage was as long ago as 18 it has only acquired common currency since the 1970s, describing the period between c.1450/1500 and c.1700/1800.¹ Of course, it is a Eurocentric term. It was coined explicitly to describe a period in European history, at a time when most of the history researched and taught was European and US history. As I recall, when I went to university in the late 1970s, what little non-western history there was on the syllabus was described as either imperial history or the history of European overseas expansion. Moreover, the term originated in the Anglo-American part of the profession; it has never gained much traction in continental Europe, with the partial exception of German-speaking countries.² Commonly, its emergence has been seen as a response to the shortcomings of shorter periodisations – the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution – which were perceived to be grounded in elite thought and politics.³ This periodisation thus accompanied and reflected a broadening, perhaps even a democratisation of the profession, and a growing widening of the discipline

¹ Phil Withington *Society in early modern England. The vernacular origins of some powerful ideas* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 1–3, chs 2–4; Hamish Scott, ‘“Early modern” Europe and the idea of early modernity’, in *The Oxford handbook of early modern European history. Volume 1: peoples and place* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 1–2. The *Journal of Early Modern History* was established in 1997.

² Randolph Starn, ‘The early modern muddle’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 6:3 (2002), 297–8; Scott, ‘“Early modern” Europe’, p. 1.

³ Scott, ‘“Early modern” Europe’, p. 2; Wolfgang Reinhard, ‘The idea of early modern history’, in *Companion to historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London, 1997), p. 288.

to incorporate thematic approaches which focused on longer term continuities and discontinuities in past societies.

'Early modern' was, and remains, an academic term. It is one of the ways in which we, as historians and, to a lesser extent, literary scholars, label and divide courses; it is also a way in which we bid for, and defend, resource. Even after decades of academic use, it has little purchase outside the profession – many textbooks (by which I mean general books intended for use in university courses) use the phrase to describe their contents, but it is little used by publishers of cross-over books, those which they hope will appeal to both an academic and a broader audience, or, indeed, as Withington notes, by their historian authors.⁴ There is, indeed, I would suggest, a lack of understanding of the term outside the profession – explanation of it is often required at university open days. But the same point can be made of much of our periodization – medieval has a resonance among the wider public, and perhaps also ancient, but even 'modern' is challenging for non-academics. (Even I am puzzled by the success of what used to be called 'later modernists' in appropriating 'modern history' exclusively to themselves.) Meanwhile, the recent predilection for 'long' and 'short' versions of centuries, a tendency to which the 'long Reformation' surely owes a debt, leaves many simply befuddled.⁵

My tone in these opening paragraphs reveals some scepticism about the value of periodisation. So, let me make the point explicitly. Periodisation seems to be a necessary evil. It is necessary because, as a profession and one in which ever greater specialisation seems unavoidable, we have to find ways of organising ourselves. Periods are not the only way of doing this, but the investment in training that is required to study the sources for any period help to ensure that it is one of the most common. But periodisation is nonetheless an evil, since one of our main tasks as historians is, surely, to understand the past and communicate that understanding. Periodisation has little to do with that task. As Lord Acton enjoined in his inaugural lecture as regius professor of history at Cambridge University well over 100 years ago, we should study problems in preference to periods.⁶ While we can find a series of very good reasons for defining the early modern period as a coherent whole, I am not convinced that there are any significant historical problems which that definition helps us to answer.

Of course – and here I come to the distinction that I make in the title of this essay – in order to convey an understanding of the past, to make sense of Acton's 'problems', we need to develop concepts, ideas and phrases which carry an explanatory force. Some of these concepts will necessarily have a chronological dimension. And we often re-think the past, develop new questions and perspectives, by challenging conceptual concepts and the chronologies which they embody. But this conceptualisation is different from periodisation, which seems to me to institutionalise a way of thinking. Periodisation risks shifting our attention from the problems of the past, to the way in which we organise it.

⁴ Withington, *Society in early modern England*, p. 2.

⁵ Though I should admit that, earlier in my career, I was happy to identify myself as an historian of the 'long' eighteenth century.

⁶ John, Baron Acton, *A lecture on the study of history* (London, 1895), pp. 63; Owen Chadwick, *Acton and history* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 214–15. It might seem odd that Acton was also the guiding mind behind the *Cambridge Modern History*, which did so much to establish the periodisation of European history since the Renaissance. But, as Tout notes, Acton's intention was that each volume 'was to centre round some historical fact of signal importance at the central idea round which individual developments were to be grouped, not accidentally but of reasoned purpose'. T. F. Tout, 'Sir Adolphus William Ward', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 11 (1924–5), 437.

I shall turn now to specifics: when I was invited to deliver the lecture on which this paper is based, my brief was to discuss periodisation in religious history. To do so, I have chosen to focus on debates about one specific, and relatively recently invented period: the 'long Reformation'. There are two ways of approaching what follows. On the one hand, my comments can be seen then as the views of an active participant in the debates, reflecting on how we think about and, more importantly, communicate our understanding of the nature and course of primarily English religious history through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, they can be seen as a case study, reflecting on the issues of historical periodisation more generally and elaborating on the scepticism that I have already expressed.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. First, I shall comment on the origins and scope of the phrase, the 'long Reformation'. I shall outline the historiographical context in which it emerged, and explore one or two of the oddities about the ways in which the phrase has been used. Second, I shall then outline some of the ways in which I think that the concept of the 'long Reformation' has been very fertile in advancing our understanding of the history of English religion between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century. I shall highlight both some of the questions and problems which it has helped us to articulate more clearly and some of the answers that it has helped us to offer. In doing this I am going to develop the distinction to which I have just alluded, and I hope it is not too artificial a distinction, between conceptualisation and periodisation. In this section I shall be focusing on what I describe as the concept of the 'long Reformation'. In the third and final section, I shall turn my attention to what I call periodisation, by which I mean the increasing tendency to use the phrase, the 'long Reformation', more simply, as a way of describing what is portrayed as a broadly coherent period. I want to suggest that this usage is much more problematic. It brings with it, as do all forms of periodisation, a set of assumptions and implications, intellectual and conceptual baggage, the effect of which too often is to predetermine the type of questions we ask, to privilege certain themes and problems, to limit and distort what we investigate and how we then describe the past.

II

First, then, let us consider the origins of the phrase, the 'long Reformation'. The earliest reference in print of which I am aware was in 1998, with the publication of *England's Long Reformation 1500–1800*.⁷ This volume contained proceedings of the Neale Colloquium in January 1996, the centrepiece of which was the Neale lecture given by Eamon Duffy under the title 'The Long Reformation: Catholicism, Protestantism and the Multitude'. Nicholas Tyacke's preface claims that the title was chosen by him and Duffy; they were then 'amused and encouraged to discover that several other historians claimed independently to have invented the concept'.⁸ Certainly, there were several historiographical developments which were converging. One of these was the impact of what is sometimes described as 'revisionism', a phrase used in Reformation studies to embrace the research of J.J. Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh and Duffy.⁹ These scholars had different emphases, but

⁷ In fact, it appeared in November 1997.

⁸ *England's Long Reformation 1600–1800*, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (London, 1998), p. vii.

⁹ Key works were: J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English people* (Oxford, 1984); Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: religion, politics and society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993); Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars. Traditional religion in England, c.1400–c.1580* (New Haven, 1992).

collectively they argued for the vitality of the pre-Reformation Catholic church and for the limited impact on the nation of the legislative changes of Henry VIII and Edward VI. One significant implication of their work was to push the narrative of the protestantisation of the English nation later, and potentially into the seventeenth century. Continental scholarship, especially the research of Jean Delumeau, has had a related influence, stressing similarities between the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, and, in particular, the drive towards 'christianization' on both sides of the confessional divide, running through the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁰ For Tyacke, the lacuna was the role of the intelligentsia and of ideas more generally. At the same time, from the other end of the period embraced by the 'long Reformation', a number of historians of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were struck by some of the continuities between the language and concerns of clergy and lay activists in their period and reformers from the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹¹

Predictably, different starting points, different preoccupations and different agendas pulled in different directions. The contributors to the Neale colloquium offered a series of very different chronologies. Duffy emphasised the success of Elizabethan and Jacobean reform in creating a protestant nation in England, and then suggested that 1662 was a key disjunction, 'as momentous as any event since the break with Rome'.¹² Tyacke also focuses very much on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but pushes the Reformation process firmly beyond 1662.¹³ Jeremy Gregory, more radically, pushes 'long Reformation' firmly into eighteenth and even nineteenth centuries. On the other hand, the revisionist roots of the 'long Reformation' perhaps explain why there has been almost no interest among its proponents in its origins; the 'long Reformation', as Patrick Collinson lamented, only extends in one direction.¹⁴ In addition, despite the acknowledged influence of Delumeau, the 'long Reformation' is a very Anglo-centric phenomenon in two respects. There has been very little, if any, interest in it on the part of continental scholars, among whom debate has focused much more on the concept of 'confessionalisation', and very little attempt to apply it to the Reformation on the continent.¹⁵ The geographical point can be pushed even further – Scotland and Ireland have also been peripheral, and, for all the emphasis in recent years on the links across the Atlantic world, the Americas have been almost entirely neglected.¹⁶

¹⁰ Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire. A new view of the Counter-Reformation* (London, 1977). The French original was published in 1971.

¹¹ See, e.g., Jeremy Gregory, 'The eighteenth-century Reformation: the pastoral task of the Anglican clergy after 1689', in *The Church of England c.1689–c.1833. From toleration to Tractarianism*, ed. John Walsh, Colin Haydon and Stephen Taylor (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 67–85, and *Restoration, reformation and reform, 1660–1828. Archbishops of Canterbury and their diocese* (Oxford, 2000). Of course, ecclesiastical historians had long followed themes through from the sixteenth into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. E.g., Norman Sykes, *Old priest and new presbyter. Episcopacy and presbyterianism since the Reformation* (Cambridge, 1956).

¹² Eamon Duffy, 'The Long Reformation: Catholicism, Protestantism and the multitude', in *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, pp. 1–32, quotation at p. 53.

¹³ Nicholas Tyacke, 'Re-thinking the "English Reformation"', in *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, pp. 1–32.

¹⁴ Patrick Collinson, 'Comment on Eamon Duffy's Neale Lecture and the colloquium', in *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, p. 72.

¹⁵ On 'confessionalisation', see Susan R. Boettcher, 'Confessionalization: Reformation, religion, absolutism and modernity', *History Compass*, 2 (2004). For an exception on Europe, see Peter G. Wallace, *The long European Reformation. Religion, political conflict, and the search for conformity, 1350–1750* (Basingstoke, 2004).

¹⁶ But for Scotland, see *Scotland's long Reformation. New perspectives on Scottish religion, c.1500–c.1660*, ed. John McCallum (Leiden, 2016).

Arguably, the emergence of the notion of the 'long Reformation' was part of a much broader re-thinking of religious history in the early modern period. Other concepts were floated around the same time – 'the later Reformation', the 'post Reformation' – though neither has been adopted as widely as the 'long Reformation'.¹⁷ Odder, perhaps, has been the reluctance of scholars of English religion to borrow from the continent – neither 'second Reformation' nor 'confessionalisation' has played a significant role in debates, despite the fact that scholars of European religious history in the seventeenth century have been grappling with similar questions.¹⁸ This linguistic instability reflects some fundamental shifts in the focus of historical attention, in particular, as a number of historians noted, away from questions about success and failure, to questions about 'how', about the process of reform. At the same time, in early modern studies more generally there has been growing dissatisfaction with established meta-narratives about secularisation and modernisation,¹⁹ inviting scholars to explore anew the nature and significance of religious debates in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The idea of a 'long Reformation' extending into and through the eighteenth century has certainly done more than Jonathan Clark's famous broadsides of the 1980s to shift scholarly attention to that century's religious history.²⁰

III

I do not want to appear too critical of the idea of the 'long Reformation'. On the contrary, the discussions and debates about it as a concept have been very fruitful – stimulated a productive re-focusing of research on this period of English religious history. The Neale colloquium was one of those stand-out conferences, bringing together a group of people who were in the process of articulating new questions and relating them to other themes and periods. It was an enormous success precisely because it was not about producing consensus, but about generating debate in a spirit of collegial exploration and friendly disagreement. Re-reading the ensuing volume twenty-years on while preparing this essay has reinforced this sense; the quality of the papers was consistently high quality.

Duffy's essay on the parish ministry provided a link with his then recent revisionist work on the sixteenth century and his earlier research on the seventeenth, highlighting the importance of the parochial ministry in the process of Reformation, a theme which has been prominent in studies since.²¹ Jonathan Barry's study of the reformation of manners movement in Bristol at the very end of the seventeenth century reveals the self-consciousness of contemporary usage of the language of reformation, as well as the continuing power of that language.²² W.R. Ward links methodism, the great British

¹⁷ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The later Reformation in England, 1547–1603* (Basingstoke, 1990); John Spurr, *The Post-Reformation: religion, politics and society in Britain, 1603–1714* (Oxford, 2006). Though note the early terminal date of the former.

¹⁸ A rare use of 'second Reformation' by Patrick Collinson, in the title of his 1986 Stenton Lecture, refers to the reign of Elizabeth, not the seventeenth century. Patrick Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia: The Cultural Second English Reformation* (Reading, 1986).

¹⁹ E.g., Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "The disenchantment of the word" reassessed', *Historical Journal*, 51:2 (2008), 497–528.

²⁰ J.C.D. Clark, *English society 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 1985). A much revised second edition, under a slightly different title, appeared in 2000.

²¹ Duffy, 'The long Reformation'.

²² Jonathan Barry, 'Bristol as a "Reformation city" c.1640–1780', in *England's long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, pp. 261–83.

evangelical movement of the eighteenth century, with its reformation roots. As in his more extended works on early evangelicalism, and as in the work of his near contemporary, John Walsh, his contribution demonstrates a subtlety and depth of insight much in advance of most writing on eighteenth-century religious history between the 1960s and 2000. Notable in this context is the sheer complexity of the Reformation legacy – the puritan legacy, though sometimes mediated through late seventeenth-century high churchmanship; the commitment to a pastoral ministry, though often, as in the commitment to itinerancy, pushing it well beyond puritan norms; a fierce anti-popery combined with a willingness to plagiarise *in extenso*, Counter-Reformation devotional texts.²³ Gregory, drawing explicitly on Delumeau, to offer a stimulating application of the christianisation thesis to eighteenth-century England and, in a way that nicely book-ends the volume, links with Duffy's suggestive insight into the importance of the parish ministry to the traditions of English Protestantism.²⁴ Despite Tyacke's manifesto, there is little on ideas. In some ways this is puzzling, as the history of ideas, loosely defined, has been one of the most fertile areas for the exploration of the importance of religion in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.²⁵ Rarely, however, has that research explicitly located itself within a 'long Reformation' paradigm, a point to which I shall return below.

This selective overview demonstrates that *England's Long Reformation*, significantly, offered a multiplicity of concepts. There was no coherent view of the 'long Reformation'; indeed, there was no sense that there could be one. Reviewers commented on this aspect of the volume and even raised it as a problem. But, for me, it is one of the strengths of the volume. Different concepts reflected different questions. We can see a shared concern among all the contributors with processes (of religious reform), with continuities and discontinuities over long periods. But, unsurprisingly, their answers were not always the same. As a whole, the collection – and work that has followed – offers a powerful account of the working out, over decades, and even centuries, of a series of seismic changes in the first half of the sixteenth century, changes the impact and significance of which were often barely felt and only dimly understood at the time.

IV

What has happened in the twenty-five years since the Neale colloquium is a shift in the usage of the phrase the 'long Reformation' from being a concept, defined in different ways and debated, to becoming a description of a period. There is a certain irony in this. Tyacke himself very much saw the volume as a collective effort aimed at breaking down the artificial barriers created by the periodisation of the 'Reformation'.²⁶ Significantly, however,

²³ W.R. Ward, 'Was there a Methodist evangelistic strategy in the eighteenth century', in *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, pp. 285–306. See also, W.R. Ward, *The protestant evangelical awakening* (Cambridge, 1992); W.R. Ward, *Early evangelicalism. A global intellectual history 1670–1789* (Cambridge, 2006); John Walsh, 'Origins of the evangelical revival', in *Essays in modern English church history in memory of Norman Sykes* (London, 1966), pp. 132–62. Sadly, Walsh's Birkbeck Lectures, which explored many of these themes, were never published.

²⁴ Jeremy Gregory, 'The making of a protestant nation: "success" and "failure" in England's Long Reformation', in *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, pp. 307–33.

²⁵ Much of the most important work has been produced by Mark Goldie and his students. See, e.g., Mark Goldie, *Contesting the English polity 1660–1688. Religion, politics and ideas* (Woodbridge, 2023). *The politics of religion in Restoration England*, ed. Tim Harris, Paul Seaward and Mark Goldie (Oxford, 1990) acted, in some sense, as an early manifesto for this approach.

²⁶ *England's Long Reformation*, ed. Tyacke, cover blurb.

Patrick Collinson perceptively warned in his essay, in the only passage in the collection to refer explicitly to ‘periodization’, of the danger that the more the concept of the Reformation is extended chronologically the less useful and meaningful it could become. To quote his metaphor, it risks doing to ‘church history what the farmers have done to Bedfordshire: rooting out the hedges and other landmarks, turning a once subtly varied landscape into a featureless prairie’.²⁷ I want to urge that we heed this warning.

The danger is evident in the spread of the usage of the phrase the ‘long Reformation’. Increasingly, it is being used – not least by literary scholars – as a form of relatively simple periodization, describing a period of religious history from the sixteenth century through to the eighteenth, and even the nineteenth. One example of this is a recent collection *Early Modern Literature and England’s Long Reformation*, edited by David Lowenstein and Alison Shell, first published as a special issue of *Reformation* in 2019.²⁸ The volume is described as making a contribution to ‘debates about the nature and length of England’s Long Reformation’. The shift here from Tyacke’s problematising concept, challenging ideas about how we understand the process of religious change, to an idea that itself becomes the focus of study, is clear. In this usage it seems to me that the ‘long Reformation’ means little more than that religion continued to be important in shaping thought, ideas and culture through the seventeenth century into the eighteenth and even the nineteenth.

For a more sophisticated use of the ‘long Reformation’ as periodization, we might look at Robert Ingram’s *Reformation Without End*, which was also published in 2019. I would like to stress that I think that this is a brilliant book, which offers a rich, complex and subtle account of ideas and polemical debate in the period between the death of Queen Anne in 1714 and the middle of the eighteenth century. But I do take issue with Ingram’s framing of his work as a ‘chapter’ in the history of the ‘long Reformation’.²⁹ As someone who has worked extensively on precisely the same period, I can see the temptation of stressing the links between it and the centuries before. Despite the publication of Jonathan Clark’s iconoclastic *English Society 1688–1832*, the persistence of secularising and modernising narratives of the period has continued to marginalise religion as a topic worthy of study beyond the confines of religious history. But I still find Ingram’s periodisation unhelpful – to pick up on Collinson’s metaphor, it risks flattening the ‘subtly varied landscape’ which Ingram himself has revealed.

There is no doubt that, in drawing attention to the notion of ‘Reformation’ in the polemical debates of the years from the 1710s to the 1750s, Ingram identifies some important themes. The call for ‘Reformation’ was itself heard repeatedly, particularly from those who believed, as the puritans of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had believed, that the religious reforms begun under Henry VIII had been left incomplete. Equally, he reveals very clearly just how preoccupied his polemicists were with history, and religious history specifically; locating themselves as the true heirs of the reformers remained as important as it had ever been in bolstering claims about doctrine, ecclesiology and the proper ordering of church and state. But, for me at least, periodising all of this as part of the ‘long Reformation’ obscures important themes. Not the least of these is another theme highlighted by Ingram, that his period needs to be understood as a post-revolutionary

²⁷ Collinson, ‘Comment’, p. 75.

²⁸ *Early modern literature and England’s Long Reformation*, ed. David Lowenstein and Alison Shell, special issue of *Reformation*, 24:2 (2019)

²⁹ Robert G. Ingram, *Reformation without end. Religion, politics and the past in post-revolutionary England* (Manchester, 2019), p. 334.

society, still working through the implications of the revolutions of the 1640s and of 1688-9. Of course, the ideas and events of both those revolutions were themselves influenced in part by the Reformation. But, even when the participants were busy re-printing texts from the sixteenth-century, they were also doing new things with them, as is demonstrated by Anthony Milton's outstandingly rich account of *England's Second Reformation. The Battle for the Church of England 1625-62*.³⁰ The string of reformations, which Milton identifies as component elements of the *Second Reformation* of these years, while sharing characteristics with each other and with the debates of the sixteenth century, were also responding to changing contexts, religious, intellectual and political, and were doing so in ways that were new. An important theme of Ingram's work seems to me to be analogous: he is mapping out the contours of debates about the early eighteenth-century 'church-state' (a terminology which is itself indicative of something new), which reveal the way in which its supporters were struggling to define and defend it against a series of constantly shifting challenges: from deists, protestant dissenters, socinians and arians, enthusiasts and Methodists. Some of orthodoxy's assailants, as well as its defenders, defined themselves in terms of the 'Reformation', though many did not, or did so only tangentially³¹ – and that is before we take account of the fact that many of the participants in these debates were also redefining what the 'Reformation' itself had been. It seems to me that the world that Ingram describes so well would barely have been recognisable to the first generation of English reformers.

The deployment of the periodisation of the 'long Reformation' in this way seems to me also to raise unproductive and distracting questions, shifting our attention from historical problems, narratives and explanations to historiographical cul-de sacs. In Ingram's case, it raises the question, when did the 'long Reformation' end? This question is only of relevance if we are interested in creating 'a period'. It is not clear to me what Ingram's answer, that the 'long Reformation' ends suddenly in the late eighteenth century, adds to his analysis of the patterns of thought that he is analysing. If he wants to argue that the patterns of thinking about the 'church-state' that he describes in the early eighteenth century were replaced suddenly in the second half of the century by very different patterns, then that is another historical problem, and one certainly worthy of analysis. The process needs to be described; the reasons for change explained. I am quite happy to be convinced that a radical change did occur, but, perhaps paradoxically, it would be very difficult to persuade me that important strands of religious thought were not still preoccupied with the meaning of 'the Reformation'. If nothing else, the vast outpouring of new editions of the works of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century divines would have to be explained away.³² Indeed, it seems to me that churchmen across the denominational spectrum in the nineteenth century were every bit as preoccupied with the history of the Reformation – or, for that matter, the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer – as their eighteenth-century predecessors, albeit in rather different ways. Turning the 'long Reformation' into a period pushes us into identifying relatively short periods of crisis or dramatic change that begin and end it and away from exploration of those processes of continuity and change which are fundamental to understanding the complexity of the past.

³⁰ Cambridge, 2021.

³¹ The emergence of the concept of 'priestcraft' in the language of the critics of orthodoxy during the second half of the seventeenth century is another indicator of the nature and extent of change in religious debate. See Justin Champion, *The pillars of priestcraft shaken. The Church of England and its enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge, 1992).

³² Note especially the foundation of the Parker Society and the Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology in the 1840s.

This is not an argument for stretching the period of the 'long Reformation' into the nineteenth century, as has been suggested by some literary scholars and historians. Rather it is a plea to eschew periodisation, to avoid Collinson's flattening of the landscape, and to spend more time thinking about and trying to understand its richness and diversity.

My current project, with Kenneth Fincham at the University of Kent, is, to some extent, premised on this point.³³ There is no doubt that, in our approach to the religious history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, we have both been influenced by research which has been stimulated by using the concept of the 'long Reformation' to disrupt established orthodoxies and narratives. Indeed, our book will focus on the period central to the concept of the 'long Reformation', from around 1625 (the accession of Charles I and the subsequent rise to power of Archbishop Laud) to around the middle of the eighteenth century, by when many of the central structures of the Georgian Church at least appear settled. However, its starting-point, which we think self-evident, is that the nature and character of the Church of England in 1750 was very different from what it had been in 1625. The two of us have collaborated for most of our academic careers, but we are still surprised how often our assumption about some aspect or other of the religious history, derived from research at one end of the period, is not shared by the other. This experience, of trying to understand how we get from 'Kenneth's 1625' to 'my 1750', is one of the things that convinced us that this is a project worth doing. At the centre of the process of change that we are trying to explain is the creation of 'Anglicanism'. As historians now recognise, it is anachronistic to describe the English Church of 1625 as Anglican;³⁴ by 1750, while it is not perhaps the commonplace that it became over the following two centuries, it has ceased to be anachronistic and certainly has value as a term to describe how members of the Church of England identified themselves and their church in a way that distinguished them from the members of other religious groups in what was now a pluralistic world. That, of course, is another central part of the process of change: the fracturing of the national church, in many ways a reality as well as an ideal of English religious life for a millennium and a half, to be replaced by a plurality of sects, and, perhaps even more, by the acceptance of this pluralism, of some form of religious tolerance, as something which might be a positive force in religious life, rather than an evil which had to be endured until unity could be re-established.

V

I would like to end by exploring a little further some of the themes in the religious history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which we risk eliding, or flattening out, by imposing a periodisation of the 'long Reformation'. One of the most significant and intractable of these is the problem of the decline of zeal in the mid-seventeenth century.³⁵ What do I mean by 'the decline of zeal'? One way of re-framing the problem is to ask what happened to the mentality and convictions that impelled a significant number of Englishmen

³³ We are preparing a book, provisionally entitled *Revolution and the creation of Anglicanism c.1625–c.1750* for Yale University Press

³⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'The myth of the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, 30:1 (1991), 1–19; Anthony Milton, 'Reformation, identity and "Anglicanism", c.1520–1662', in *The Oxford history of Anglicanism. Volume 1: Reformation and identity, c.1520–1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford, 2017), pp. 1–27.

³⁵ While my conceptualisation is somewhat different, this problem has long been recognised and debated by historians. Among many other approaches, see G.R. Cragg, 'The collapse of militant puritanism', in *Essays in modern English church history*, ed. Bennett and Walsh, pp. 76–103; Christopher Hill, *The experience of defeat. Milton and some contemporaries* (London, 1984).

to take up arms to resist the changes, as they saw them, that were being imposed on the English church by Charles I and Laud through the 1630s, and also impelled a smaller, but still significant number, to fight to bring about further reform of the religious settlement achieved by Elizabeth and James I, which they saw as still far too tainted by the remnants of popery. It is clearly not enough simply to say that puritanism was defeated. Nor can we explain it as a passing of a generation. The problem is all the more challenging, because the regime that was restored following the collapse of the republican experiments of the 1650s closely resembled in almost all external essentials the pre-1640 Church of Charles I and Laud. Nor, it is increasingly clear, is it sufficient to claim that the success of the Restoration religious settlement was in marginalising enough puritans and pushing them into dissent, leaving them unable to campaign for change effectively from within the Church and, at the same time, lacking political power outside to demand reform. We cannot explain the conformity of many former puritans as acceptance of the lure of preferment. Nor can we explain the quiescence of many dissenters and their reluctance to engage in political opposition in terms of their continuing hope for essentially minor changes in the government and worship of the church to allow them to rejoin the national church. I certainly do not have a neat, still less a concise answer to this problem. It does seem clear to me, however, that part of the answer lies in a discomforting awareness on the part of some that the failure to succeed in their endeavours to achieve further reform (however they defined reform) was a manifestation of God's displeasure and his punishment of the nation for their continuing sins. Their zeal had not been rewarded. At the same time, one can point to the growing awareness among many clergy of the pastoral impact of the failure to find a settlement of church and state, which led to a growing acceptance of, even an appetite for, collaboration and co-operation across the denominational divisions which had come to define so many of them over the previous twenty years. Again, their undoubted zeal for God's cause had not achieve the desired and expected results.

Another problem is how we explain the devotional and liturgical flowering among episcopalians in the 1650s and how important it was in shaping the character of Anglicanism through the later seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. It is all too easy to see episcopalians, those who remained loyal to the old order of episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer after their abolition in the mid-1640s, as fundamentally conservative, hankering only after the old order that had been destroyed in 1641–2. But that interpretation fails to do justice to the remarkable outpouring of works, circulated widely in the 1650s, often in print, which offered new expressions of piety, many of them specifically for laity who now lacked the regular routine of Prayer Book services in their parish churches. Some of these works, like Allestree's *Whole Duty of Man*, first published in 1657, became classics, which were regularly reprinted well into the eighteenth century.³⁶ Together they formed an eclectic range of aids to devotion, some of which were decidedly idiosyncratic: it is worth remembering that half of the *Eikon Basilike*, attributed to Charles I himself, was taken up by prayers.³⁷ At the same time, efforts to preserve Prayer Book worship generated much liturgical experimentation and research. It is tempting to suggest that this was swept away by a conservative reaction at the Restoration – the 1662 Book of Common Prayer

³⁶ Richard Allestree, *The whole duty of man* (London, 1657). The extensive publication history through the eighteenth century can be tracked in the *English short-title catalogue*: www.estc.bl.uk.

³⁷ *Eikon basilike. The portraiture of his sacred majesty in his solitudes and sufferings*, ed. Philip A. Knachel (Ithaca, NY, 1966). It was first published in 1659, with many reprints in the second half of the seventeenth century.

different only in minor detail from its predecessor. But this story may be more complex than this narrative would suggest, as another of the under-explored aspects of religious change through the seventeenth century is the increasing influence of the laity. The ability of the laity to determine the nature and character of private and family devotion is well-established, though it is too often seen as the preserve of a spiritual elite. Much less well understood is the influence of the laity over the character of church worship, despite the fact that the failure to re-establish the authority of the church courts after 1660 meant that traditions of congregational independence which became established in the 1640s and 1650s often persisted, albeit within a very different liturgical and legal framework.

These developments all intersected with a range of intellectual changes which had an equally profound impact on the character of the church and religious debates more generally. Claims to priestly power and autonomy were increasingly attacked. In this respect, at least, the settlement of 1660–62 was emphatically not neo-Laudian. Even if it took some decades for the church courts to lose their jurisdiction over moral offences – and in some northern dioceses it survived into the second half of the eighteenth century – the powers of the pre-civil war courts, which were as important to the conception of the national church held by the presbyterian clergy as by their episcopalian counterparts, never fully recovered. Lawyers became ever more assertive of the rights of the common law courts, while the notion of ‘priestcraft’, the usurped claims of the clergy to spiritual authority over the laity, spread rapidly in the later seventeenth century to the point where they had become commonplaces of political discourse by the early eighteenth century. Conversely, the claim of English monarchs to a supremacy over national religion which was Constantinian in its scope was denuded, almost in parallel, to be replaced by a supremacy defined and limited by parliamentary statute and exercised, even in matters like the appointment of bishops, more by advice of political advisers than bishops.

I could go on. I have not even mentioned the changing valence of anti-Catholicism and anti-popery, themes at the very heart of any Reformation paradigm. The point of these comments, however, is not to attempt to outline the themes of a book that is still a few years from completion. Rather, these final comments are an attempt to provide some sense of the complex intersecting themes of English religious history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I have no doubt that some of them can be valuably problematised and developed by thinking about them in terms of continuities and discontinuities back to the sixteenth century. But I hope I have explained, even justified, my scepticism that all the nuances and complexities of the history of religious change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be enhanced by labelling that period the ‘long Reformation’, with all the baggage and constraints which that periodisation brings with it.

By way of brief conclusion, I would like to introduce another periodisation, the ‘Enlightenment’. In recent years some intellectual historians, with those of England and the Dutch Republic at the fore, have been extending the ‘Enlightenment’ backwards into the seventeenth century.³⁸ The English Enlightenment has found expression in some of the

³⁸ An influential early contribution was Roy Porter, ‘The Enlightenment in England’, in *The Enlightenment in national context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 1–18. On the Dutch Enlightenment, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical enlightenment. Philosophy and the making of modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001).

themes on which I have touched: the expression of anti-clericalism, in concepts such as priestcraft; the challenges to Reformation concepts of the church-state; a growing willingness to challenge the pillars of revealed Christianity, in Arianism, Socinianism and deism. This tendency recently stretched the 'Enlightenment' back to the 1650s.³⁹ It is tempting to see all of this as an imperialist contest for territory, waged between religious and intellectual historians, expanding their claims under the banners of 'Reformation' and 'Enlightenment'. While tempting, it is also simplistic and cynical. But, to return to Acton, I am sometimes left wondering why so much energy is devoted to battling over periodisation and defining periods, rather than focusing on problems and the challenge of explaining the complexities of the past.

* This essay is a slightly revised version of a keynote lecture which I was invited to give in September 2023 at the British-East Asian Conference of Historians, held at the Institute of Historical Research. I am very grateful to the organisers, especially Professor Philip Murphy, for the invitation to participate in the kind of stimulating cross-cultural exchange which is all too rare even in modern academia. I would like to thank the participants in the conference for their stimulating exchanges, and I would particularly like to thank Professor Shigeru Akita and Professor Masayuki Sato for the enthusiasm of their response to the lecture and for their comments, which encouraged me to submit this revised version to a wider audience. Professor Nicole Reinhardt provided some valuable suggestions about the European dimension.

³⁹ E.g., William Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment. Orientalism, religion and politics in England and its empire, 1648–1715* (Cambridge, 2015).



Citation on deposit: Taylor, S. (in press). The long Reformation: conceptualisation and periodisation in English religious history between the 16th and 18th centuries. The East Asian Journal of British History

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