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Review article: 'Revisionism' in Tudor reformation studies*

Christopher Haigh, in his programmatic *The English reformation revised*,[1] marshaled a plethora of empirical studies of the Church at national, diocesan, and more local levels to challenge the conventional interpretation of the reformation in England. Those studies revealed that the late medieval Church in England was in a far better condition – better supervised, better served by its parish clergy and better supported by the laity – than historians had previously imagined. That became the foundation upon which a 'revised' interpretation of the English reformation, or *English reformations*[2] as Haigh titled his summative book on the subject, was based. Haigh argued that the Tudor reformations were imposed by the crown from 'above' upon reluctant congregations, and that religious change was achieved slowly, and not entirely successfully even by the end of the Tudor era. Eamon Duffy's monumental *Stripping of the altars* offered an impressive mass of physical and documentary evidence to confirm the 'revisionist' thesis.[3] Haigh's interpretation has become something close to a new orthodoxy in English reformation studies over the past two decades. In two new books Eamon Duffy sets out to consolidate his own version of the 'revisionist' thesis.

In *Saints, sacrilege and sedition* Duffy is keen to emphasise that 'the differences between so-called "revisionists" were at least as significant as their agreements': his own fundamental contention is that the reformation 'represented a deep and traumatic cultural hiatus with the medieval past', while Haigh's fundamental contention is that when the dust had settled on the religious upheavals 'nothing very much had in fact happened'.[4] Behind those fundamental contentions seems to be the fact that Duffy is a passionately committed Catholic,

* THE LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH CHURCH: VITALITY AND VULNERABILITY BEFORE THE BREACH WITH ROME. By G. W. Bernard. Pp 304. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2012. $45.

SAINTS, SACRILEGE AND SEDITION: RELIGION AND CONFLICT IN THE TUDOR REFORMATIONS. By Eamon Duffy. Pp 256. London: Bloomsbury. 2012. £20.

FIRES OF FAITH: CATHOLIC ENGLAND UNDER MARY TUDOR. By Eamon Duffy. Pp 280. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2009. £12.99 paperback.

[1] Christopher Haigh, *The English reformation revised* (Cambridge, 1987).

[2] Christopher Haigh, *English reformations: religion, politics and society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993).

[3] Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, 1992).

[4] Eamon Duffy, *Saints, sacrilege and sedition: religion and conflict in the Tudor reformations* (London, 2012), p. 6.

while Haigh is an avowed agnostic who has been, 'quite erroneously', bunched together with the 'Catholic revisionists'.[5] Duffy is a little ambiguous about the idea of 'Catholic revisionists', but he identifies several of the more prominent British historians of late medieval and early modern religion as Catholic by ideological conviction or cultural formation and he claims that their influence has been disproportionate to their numbers.[6] He remarks that, 'no-one appears to have thought it worth comment or concern that before these recent debates most British reformation historians were in fact practising or at least cultural Protestants', among whom he names Diarmaid MacCulloch.[7] MacCulloch in turn, in a review of this book observed that, 'At times here, Duffy ceases to be a Tudor historian who is a Catholic, and becomes a Catholic historian. That will please many, but it's a shame.'[8]

Duffy's chapter on 'Reformation unraveled: facts and fictions' is a sustained piece of Catholic polemic. He asserts that in England, 'Protestantism came to be constituted by its NO to Catholicism'.[9] He states that it 'clenched itself around a series of negatives and rejections'[10] and he piles on negative adjectives to characterise it: 'dividing', 'rejection', 'reduced', 'smashed', 'denounced', 'narrowing', 'silenced', 'banished', 'drastically reduced', 'destruction', 'amputated', 'abolition', 'closed off' – all in the first two paragraphs. He traces a line from John Foxe's *Actes and monuments* (1563) to the work of A. F. Pollard and A. G. Dickens. Duffy takes little solace from recent changes in historical emphases in school and university curricula because the older historiography remains embedded in the English mind – he cites Kingsley Amis's *The alteration* (1976) and Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) to prove his point. This essay appeals for a more sympathetic appreciation of the pre-reformation England that was 'hammered into oblivion in those terrible years'.[11]

Part II of this book, beautifully illustrated with striking photographs, shows Duffy at his best. He deploys a tremendous volume of physical and documentary evidence, much of it neglected heretofore, to demonstrate convincingly the strength of lay commitment to the pre-reformation Church and its doctrines, and then to show how the institution was stripped bare under Edward VI. In Part III Duffy focuses on Bishop Fisher and Cardinal Pole at the expense of 'their lesser adversaries – Cranmer, Ridley, Latimer'.[12] His discussion of Fisher in chapters six and seven is engaging and interesting. However, the discussion of Pole and Cranmer juxtaposed in chapter eight, particularly for the period when Cranmer was imprisoned and faced execution for heresy, is far from even-handed. Duffy concludes by observing that Pole's unflattering portrait of Cranmer as 'a concubinate priest, feebly subservient to brute tyranny, untruthful from the start and unstable to the end … would shape Catholic perceptions of Cranmer and his reformation down to modern times. And in that sense at least, Pole had the last

[5] Ibid., p. 5.
[6] Ibid., pp 8–9.
[7] Ibid., p. 7.
[8] Diarmaid MacCulloch, review of *Saints, sacrilege and sedition* in *The Guardian*, 27 July 2012.
[9] Duffy, *Saints, sacrilege and sedition*, p. 34.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 51.
[12] Ibid., p. 14.

word on Cranmer.'[13] Given that Pole, with his queen, had Cranmer burnt to death, such a conclusion seems petty. It is symptomatic of a learned book marred by polemics, which is indeed a shame.

In *Fires of faith* Duffy set out to revise our perception of Catholic England under Mary Tudor.[14] It addresses head-on the burning of 284 Protestant men and women, stating that, 'In sixteenth-century terms the burnings were inevitable, and … in practice they were efficiently carried out …'.[15] 'Nor, in terms of the effective containment of dissent in early modern society, does it seem very obvious that the execution of heretics was the "wrong weapon"'.[16] He shows that the campaign to kill 'heretics' was not 'running out of steam' even to the moment of the queen's death.[17] However, his claim that the burnings were 'inevitable' is contradicted by the fact that they constituted 'the most intense religious persecution of its kind in sixteenth-century Europe', as Duffy himself admits.[18] Nor can they plausibly be considered 'a matter of moral hindsight'[19] given the responses to Foxe's near-contemporary account of the burnings in *Actes and monuments*. There is much in *Fires of faith* that will reward close attention from reformation scholars, particularly Duffy's exposition of the efforts made in Mary's reign to implement a constructive counter-reformation programme in England. However, both of his recent books must be read as the work of a Catholic apologist, with all that that implies.

In a conscious challenge to the 'revisionist' paradigm, G. W. Bernard re-examined *The late medieval English Church* in terms of its 'vitality and vulnerability' before the breach with Rome.[20] It is a very measured book, but the author struggles openly to 'strike the correct balance, to determine criteria of evaluation'.[21] In his discussion of the diocesan clergy he acknowledges the 'most remarkable fact' that the number of complaints made against the English clergy was low,[22] that there is little sign of lay concern about preaching,[23] that the number of graduate clergymen was increasing,[24] that 'there were many vigorous and effective bishops'[25] and 'the great majority made a fair job of their responsibilities'.[26] Yet he suggests that, 'Maybe the greatest weakness of the late medieval Church was the sparsity of truly holy men whose evident sanctity would compensate for the human failings of the majority of churchmen.'[27] He

[13] Ibid., p. 194.
[14] Eamon Duffy, *Fires of faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven and London, 2009).
[15] Ibid., p. 7.
[16] Ibid., p. 79.
[17] Ibid., p. 170.
[18] Ibid., p. 7.
[19] Ibid., p. 79.
[20] G. W. Bernard, *The late medieval English Church: vitality and vulnerability before the breach with Rome* (New Haven and London, 2012).
[21] Ibid., pp 71, 86.
[22] Ibid., p. 69.
[23] Ibid., p. 73.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., p. 49.
[26] Ibid., p. 67.
[27] Ibid., p. 51.

endorses the 'revisionist' studies that, 'Laymen were much involved in the running of parish churches',[28] that confraternities and chantries were 'extraordinarily flourishing', and that pilgrimage 'was still a vital part of English religious life'.[29] He outlines various means by which ignorance and theological misunderstanding were addressed by the Church, and he concedes that 'it may well be the case that more people in the later middle ages were trying to live model Christian lives … Vitality indeed; but vulnerability also, since the efforts of those who strove to live better dangerously showed up the inadequacies of those who did not.'[30]

Bernard's attempt to 'balance both vitality and vulnerability' in the late medieval Church is somewhat schematic, and contrasting tangible evidence of good order against ethereal aspirations is problematic. He admits that his emphasis on 'vulnerability' was a response to the current 'revisionist' orthodoxy in English reformation studies.[31] The key vulnerability of the Church, which he demonstrates very effectively, was the fact that it was a monarchial church 'which, in the final analysis, was always the king's to command and control'.[32] Nonetheless, Bernard concludes his book by effectively endorsing the 'revisionist' interpretation of the late medieval English Church as vital, well-ordered and popular before the breach with Rome.

In an earlier avowedly 'post-revisionist' work Ethan A. Shagan accepted that the reformation in England was 'an act of state',[33] but he highlighted the willingness of many otherwise conservative people to 'collaborate' with the crown's attacks on Catholic institutions because of 'varying combinations of loyalism, greed, strategy and conviction'.[34] He stated that even by 1553 'there were few conversions to Protestantism',[35] but argued that the changes in religious outlook and beliefs that occurred by then were 'impossible to reverse'.[36] Eamon Duffy welcomed Shagan's book, with some reservations, as 'a valuable, if sometimes overexcitable, consolidation of the revisionist account of the reformation, rather than a move beyond it'.[37] In *Fires of faith* Duffy challenges the assumption that the prospects for a Catholic revival after 1553 were discouraging. That begs the question of how then did the reformation succeed in England in Elizabeth's reign.

It may be that Ireland's experience of the Tudor reformations can throw some light on that of England. Significant differences have been identified between the Church in Ireland and England before Henry's breach with Rome. Compared with its English counterpart the Irish Church was poorer, its diocesan clergy were less well remunerated, less likely to be graduates, less likely to preach but they

[28] Ibid., p. 117.
[29] Ibid., p. 125.
[30] Ibid., p. 116.
[31] Ibid., pp 236–7.
[32] Ibid., p. 48.
[33] Ethan A. Shagan, *Popular politics and the English reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), pp 10, 17.
[34] Ibid., p. 306.
[35] Ibid., pp 23, 303.
[36] Ibid., p. 307.
[37] Duffy, 'The English reformation after revisionism' in 'Recent trends in the study of Christianity', *Renaissance Quarterly*, lix, no. 3 (Fall, 2006), p. 726.

were also less autonomous of the laity.[38] Diocesan administration in Ireland was smaller-scaled, less intrusive and generally less coercive than that in English dioceses.[39] On the other hand, mendicant friars exercised a much greater role in the Irish Church, and enjoyed far greater levels of public support than their English confrères.[40] Yet there were enough commonalities between the Church on either side of the Irish Sea to suggest that comparisons of their experiences of the same Tudor reformations can be instructive.

Though the Irish parliament of 1560 endorsed the Elizabethan settlement more or less as it had been endorsed by the English parliament in the previous year, the trajectories of the Elizabethan reformation in England and that in the Pale, that part of Ireland most directly under English authority, diverged dramatically almost from the start. By contrast with England, the crown could not insist on a general subscription to the oath of supremacy by church or secular officials in the Pale.[41] No injunctions were issued or visitations conducted to launch the new religious settlement in Ireland. The local Anglophone élites would not enforce conformity to the queen's religious settlement.[42] According to Hugh Brady, Elizabethan bishop of Meath (1563–84), 'So are they, for the most part, nay, I might say all, thwarters and hinderers of matters that should tend to the reformation of religion.'[43] Non-attendance at Elizabethan church services was general in the Pale from the start: a survey conducted across the Pale in 1565 discovered that 'very few' of the landholders in the region had ever attended a Protestant service but continued to attend Mass, and the lesser orders were no different.[44] That general manifestation of recusancy *avant la lettre* had no parallel in contemporary England.

An Irish ecclesiastical high commission was established to try to compel people to attend Church of Ireland services, and just as importantly not to disrupt those services, as was their wont.[45] The commission concentrated its efforts in the Pale, and managed to force some congregations (especially in Dublin and Drogheda) to attend Protestant services intermittently until the mid-1580s when the effort was virtually abandoned.[46] However, without the provision of Protestant ministers in the parishes such coerced conformity proved to be counterproductive in terms of winning hearts and minds.[47] It is quite remarkable that almost six years into her reign, Elizabeth's reformation was being promoted by way of preaching among the approximately 2,500 parishes in Ireland by only two Protestant bishops, Adam Loftus, archbishop of Armagh, an Englishman, and Hugh Brady, the recently appointed bishop of Meath, an Irishman, and by a vicar visiting briefly from London.[48] In fact, it proved to be impossible to recruit a

[38] Henry A. Jefferies, *The Irish Church and the Tudor reformations* (Dublin, 2010), pp 25–35, 57–61, 63–4.
[39] Ibid., pp 45–53.
[40] Colmán Ó Clabaigh, *The friars in Ireland, 1224–1540* (Dublin, 2012), pp 53 et seq.
[41] Jefferies, *The Irish Church*, pp 128–31.
[42] Ibid., pp 130–1, 136–42.
[43] W. M. Brady, *State papers concerning the Irish Church* (London, 1868), no. v.
[44] Jefferies, *The Irish Church*, pp 138–42.
[45] Ibid.
[46] James Murray, *Enforcing the English reformation in Ireland: clerical resistance and political conflict in the diocese of Dublin* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 282.
[47] Jefferies, *The Irish Church*, pp 206–7.
[48] Ibid., pp 135–6.

reformation ministry for Ireland's parishes throughout the span of Elizabeth's reign. That was not simply because of economic problems as there were far more remunerative benefices in Ireland than there were Protestant clergy available to staff them. The basic problem was the sheer absence of an Irish Protestant community from which Protestant clergymen, and Protestant officials in central and local government, could be recruited. For anyone trying to explain why the reformation failed in Ireland, the absence of native Protestants from the start of Elizabeth's reign must surely count as a significant factor. That is not to argue that the Catholic mission to Ireland was bound to succeed, nor is it inconceivable that the crown might have made greater progress in advancing religious change if it had invested the necessary human and material resources with effect in Ireland.[49] Nonetheless, in the absence of a significant number of Protestant advocates the reformation did not in fact succeed in any part of Ireland. In 1585 John Long, the Elizabethan archbishop of Armagh and primate of all Ireland, reckoned that there were hardly forty Irish-born Protestants in the entire kingdom.[50] An Irish Protestant reckoned that their number had grown to only 120 by 1600.[51] Even in Dublin not more than twenty Irish-born house-holders attended Church of Ireland services, and only four of them would receive communion.[52] By the evidence of contemporaries, Elizabeth's reformation failed comprehensively and absolutely in Ireland.

Comparison with the Tudor reformations in Ireland reveals that Eamon Duffy's 'Catholic revisionism' grossly underestimates the positive impact of reformation teachings in England before Elizabeth's reign. If Protestantism was as unpopular as he asserts in his latest books then Elizabeth's reformation in England would have failed for want of Protestant ministers to propagate it, and secular officials willing to enforce conformity to it, not to mention congregations prepared to accept it. If Duffy were correct, one might reasonably expect to find far more evidence in England of resistance in the form of widespread non-attendance at Protestant services or disruptive behaviour by those forced to attend, a general withdrawal from the office of churchwarden, a general withdrawal of financial support for the maintenance of churches, and a popular resort to priests for continued access to Catholic sacraments, as was the case in the Pale. Instead, Elizabeth's reformation proved to be a run-away success in England while English Catholicism shriveled to a shadow of its former self. The fundamental problem with 'Catholic revisionism' is that it gives every appearance of striving to explain the English reformation away. It tends to airbrush Protestants out of England's reformation story.[53] Comparing Ireland's experience of the Tudor reformations with that of England's serves to show how critically important the pre-existence of a significant cohort of Protestant reformers was to the success of Elizabeth's reformation in England because the absence of a significant cohort of reformers in her other kingdom contributed very much indeed to the failure of her reformation in Ireland.

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[49] Ibid., pp 280–1.
[50] Brady, *State papers*, no. lxix.
[51] T.N.A., SP 63/207, pt 4/ 3.
[52] T.N.A., SP 63/207, pt 6/ 126.
[53] Christopher Haigh, 'So why did it happen?' in *The Tablet*, 20 Apr. 2002.