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ELIZABETH A. CULLING

Lifelines: The English Reformation

Everyone who knows anything about Church history has an opinion about the Reformation. It touches us as does no other period of the Church's story. If you went to theological college and managed to escape with doing much Church history, you probably did not get away without a glance at the Reformation. Even beyond the Church, the Reformation remains the period of history about which many people can say something with a degree of confidence. Witness the continuing popularity of films about Elizabeth, novels about the six wives of Henry VIII or school projects on the Tudors. At the very least people know the Reformation was something to do with Catholics and Protestants, though most people think that the last word has been said about who did what and why.

This brief essay will only deal with the English Reformation. There is plenty to say about recent research in this area, and yet until recently it seemed a very settled piece of history. Catholic historians wrote Catholic histories of the Reformation and Protestant historians wrote Protestant histories. The English people, so the story went, were trapped in a moribund Catholic faith which did not serve their spiritual needs. It was geared towards the clergy and religious with the result that the English were fiercely anti-clerical, and longing for a more spiritually relevant Church. Along came Luther on the continent whose views chimed in with those of the Lollards, the spiritual descendants of Wycliff. They were persecuted by the ecclesiastical hierarchy for their demands for a lay-centred, biblical religion and for a time it was difficult to distinguish between them and early English Lutherans. Everything changed when King Henry VIII wished for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon and began to distance himself from the Pope, until Cranmer was able to find a way of justifying his actions for him. The Reformation proceeded slowly under Henry, much more quickly under Edward VI, and despite a painful set-back under Mary, its eventual success under Elizabeth was guaranteed. The main source of debate among scholars was whether the Reformation was primarily an act of state, imposed on a not altogether unreceptive populace, or a grassroots movement which ultimately could not have been stopped. All this could be found in the standard history of the period by A. G. Dickens (a committed Anglican), and he seemed to have said the last word on the subject.¹

However, the current landscape of Reformation studies is very different, and it seems at times that the whole picture is being redrawn by the many studies which are pouring out. The change began very quietly with a short book by the Roman

1 A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, Batsford, London 1964.

Catholic historian J. J. Scarisbrick called *The Reformation and the English People*.² In it, Scarisbrick, who had already published an excellent biography of Henry VIII some years earlier, examined the evidence of wills and account books, of medieval church buildings and of lay fraternities. He argued that far from welcoming the Reformation with open arms, the English people were well satisfied with the state of their religion, and were prepared to invest money into making sure of its continuation. He challenged the supposed anticlericalism of the laity, stating clearly that the impetus for change came from 'above' and not below. What is more, when it came to the dissolution of the monasteries and later the chantries, guilds and parish churches between 1536 and 1553, there was deep hostility, and efforts to preserve and then revive that which was under attack.

Since Scarisbrick, the floodgates have opened and a multitude of books have been written supporting his position. Many of these studies are local ones describing what happened in parishes rather than at court or in the city of London, and the picture which has emerged is of a nation reluctant to let go of its old tried and tested ways in religious matters. The book which has made most impact in this area is the large and impressive study by another Roman Catholic, Eamon Duffy: *The Stripping of the Altars*.³ The first part of the book looks at the liturgical life of the pre-Reformation Church, its devotional literature, catechisms, the mass, the place of the saints and their relics, prayer, attitudes to death and purgatory. Packed with detail, much of Duffy's evidence is visual: carvings on bench ends, pillars, fonts, statues, tabernacles, altars, reredoses, wall paintings and stained glass. All this is deliberate: Duffy wanted to chart the richness and complexity of late medieval Catholicism and its impact upon ordinary people. The second part of the book tells the story of the dismantling of this complex world from the break with Rome until 1580, when Duffy concedes that the new religion was established under Elizabeth. Duffy must be taken very seriously. He has used the evidence of local archives and artefacts and has presented a side of the Reformation hitherto not taken fully into account. It is one thing to pass laws and announce new forms of liturgy subtly worked out by theologians. It is another to win the hearts and minds of the masses. Of course even though the evidence is there, interpretations will continue to differ. Duffy's descriptions of the lavish devotion paid to saints, relics and the rest caused one reviewer to comment that 'one person's veneration is another's superstition.'

Even if constitutional history is out and local / social history is in, it still remains difficult to know what the average Tudor householder and his friends thought about anything. This has not deterred those who have undertaken intensive work on local archives to find out more about what life was like in the parishes. The workings of church courts, visitation records, church wardens' accounts and the occasional personal record have yielded a much better picture of how things changed. To some degree each parish was different. Each parish could be said to have had its own reformation. This is the line taken by Christopher Haigh in his book *English*

2 J. J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People*, Blackwell, Oxford 1984.

3 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 - c.1580*, Yale University Press 1992.

Reformations.⁴ Haigh's title is deliberate: THE English Reformation would maintain the idea that the only reformations to take place occurred in the Tudor period and formed a complete process, while Haigh argues that the reformations of the sixteenth century were haphazard and had only limited success, at least by Protestant standards of making either Church or people emphatically Protestant. Nor does he call the book 'the Reformation in England' for that would be to assert that what happened in England was only a local manifestation of the wider European movement, and while he admits there was some truth in this, and what occurred here must be seen in the larger context of Europe, the English Reformations did not happen because of Luther and the other reformers, nor did they follow a European pattern. Obvious though it may be to say it, Haigh's approach is a reminder that the Reformation did not drop from history as a complete package. For those who lived through the tumultuous changes, the future was still to happen and could lead anywhere. Unlike our own, theirs was not a pick and mix society. They could not pick the bits of the Reformation they liked and discard the rest. There was no individual choice in this age. Nor could they say, almost until the end of the sixteenth century, what it was like to be a Roman Catholic and what it was like to be a Protestant. Thus people could not elect for or against the Reformation in one great do-or-die decision. They made a number of lesser choices along the way as they were faced with them. We, on the other hand, have to form our ideas about the Reformation from the available evidence, which does not always produce a balanced picture. For example, the Reformation is often seen as one big event, especially from the political angle, and big events have big causes. We see rising anticlericalism, the decline of monasticism, the emergence of the nation-state and the middle classes and the decline of Christendom. But these signs did not necessarily lead to a mounting crisis at the time. Looking for the origins of known results inevitably leads to a selective use of evidence and a one-sided picture emerging. Complacency or even contentment with the status quo is ignored because neither offers a force of change to shape the future. But both were in existence in the sixteenth century as recent histories have shown.

Haigh is interested in the losers and resisters, as much as in the reformers and the victors, and also those who simply watched it all happen. He begins his book with a long account of the changes which occurred as written by an eye-witness, Roger Martyn, who lived in Long Melford and died in 1615, aged eighty eight. Another way in to the Reformation period is through the lives of individuals like Martyn, and while it must be said that we know most about the players on the centre stage, there has been a rash of new biographies of late, part of the re-writing of this period of history. They include David Daniell's study of William Tyndale, which provides a timely reminder of the enormous contribution made by Tyndale to the theology, literature and humanism of the period.⁵ Often 'the forgotten ghost in the English language', Tyndale had a crucial role to play in his translations of the Bible through his grasp of Greek and Hebrew, and this book seeks to re-instate him as a

4 Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors*, Clarendon, Oxford 1993. In contrast to some of the other writers mentioned in this article, Haigh does not appear to have a

personal commitment to a particular religious position.

5 David Daniell, *William Tyndale: a Biography*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1994.

key player in events. Thomas Cranmer has also received fresh treatment,⁶ while there have been several new substantial biographies of Thomas More.⁷ All these authors interpret their subjects anew for our own age and help us, over four hundred and fifty years later, to flesh out the period for ourselves. Reading history through individual lives, even though these particular ones are not Mr and Mrs Average, continues to provide unique insight into the period. Ackroyd's re-creation of the young More studying at the Inns of Court, for example, is extremely stimulating.

There are plenty of other books still being published about the period of the Reformation examining its different aspects. Alister McGrath, for example, writes both popular and scholarly works on Reformation thought and spirituality. What all authors writing about the Reformation must do is to take account of the reassessment of many of the accepted viewpoints. That there were a series of dramatic changes during the sixteenth century cannot be disputed. There were three legislative reformations: a Henrician one between 1530 and 1538, much of it reversed between 1538 and 1546; an Edwardian reformation between 1547 and 1553, almost completely reversed between 1553 and 1558; and an Elizabethan reformation between 1558 and 1563 which was not reversed. Together these changed the constitution, worship and belief of the English Church. The authority of the pope was rejected and replaced by that of the king, the independent jurisdiction of the clergy was broken, and church services altered. People were also taught something very different about the nature of salvation. There was a religious reformation alongside the political one and sometimes the two were in harmony with one another, and sometimes, as in 1525-32, 1539-46 and 1553-8, they were in opposition. For some people, Roger Martyn being one, the Reformation was a disaster, for he became a member of a proscribed sect. For others it was a liberation as they discovered that salvation depended not on the mediation of clergy, saints and sacraments, but on justifying faith nurtured by sermons and Bible-reading. For still others, perhaps the majority, the changes were mainly external and involved obedience rather than conviction: a move from the passive hearing of Catholic masses, to the passive hearing of sermons and psalm-singing. But for everyone it meant change, and it mattered. Doubtless the debate as to the true nature of these changes will continue. The challenge of Duffy at least, who writes about 'the increasingly lavish devotion to saints and celebration of their feasts, the thriving cult of indulgences, relics and shrines, and belief in their healing and protective power, the intense preoccupation with Rogation days and Corpus Christi processions, with bells and candles, holy water, salt and bread, Easter eggs and Assumption herbs, "charms" and incantations, invocations of the Holy Name and the Hundred Paternosters – and all the rest of an astonishingly rich religious culture'⁸ will surely not go unanswered.

The Revd Dr Elizabeth Culling is based in the Diocese of York, and is currently undertaking research in the area of spiritual direction.

6 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: a Life*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1996.

7 For example, Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More*, Chatto and Windus, London 1998.

8 From a review of Duffy by Scarisbrick in *The Tablet*, 13 February, 1993.