The Age of Reformation
The Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485–1603
Second edition

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To call this book a ‘synthesis’ is a polite way of admitting that few of the ideas are my own. I have drawn heavily on other scholars’ work, and to make matters worse, I have rarely acknowledged them directly: for this is a work of history, not historiography, and I have tried to avoid giving accounts of the debates between historians. I have particular debts to Pat Collinson, Catharine Davies, Sue Doran, Eamon Duffy, Liz Evenden, David Gehring, Tadhg Ó hAnnráchain, Eric Ives, Paulina Kewes, Peter Lake, David Loades, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Graeme Murdoch, Michael Questier and Ethan Shagan. I am especially grateful to Eric Carlson, Jane Dawson, Tom Freeman and Natalie Mears, each of whom read draft chapters for me as well as allowing me to plunder their work. Highest honours go to Peter Marshall, who read more than half of the text amongst many, many other services. Keith Robbins, the series editor, and the anonymous readers for Longman, were kind about the book while making some invaluable suggestions and pointing out some egregious mistakes. I am confident, however, that I have still managed to smuggle some errors and misjudgements past these scholars’ eagle eyes. Finally, writing this book has made plain to me how much I owe to my students, in particular those I taught at the University of Birmingham from 1999 to 2006. I am conscious, specifically, of debts to Louise Campbell, Anna French, Sylvia Gill, Bethan Palmer, Andy Poppleton, Sarah Spencer and Neil Younger, many of whom will recognise echoes of their work here. I hope I taught them a fraction as much as they have taught me, and I dedicate this book to them collectively in gratitude.

1485 Accession of Henry VII (England)
1487 Lambert Simnel conspiracy
1488 Accession of James IV (Scotland)
1491 Perkin Warbeck conspiracy begins
1493 Lordship of the Isles suppressed
1497 Cornish rebellion. Capture of Perkin Warbeck
1502 Death of Prince Arthur
1509 Anglo-Scottish treaty of ‘perpetual peace’
1512–14 Death of Henry VII. Accession of Henry VIII
1516 Battle of Flodden. Death of James IV. Accession of James V
1517 Martin Luther protests against indulgences
1518 Treaty of London (‘universal peace’)
1522–25 England at war with France
1525 Battle of Pavia: Amicable Grant
1527 Henry VIII begins campaigning for a divorce
1528 James V’s personal rule begins
1529–30 Wolsey’s fall from power
1529–36 English ‘Reformation Parliament’ meets
1533 Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn. Princess Elizabeth born
1534 Act of Supremacy. England breaks with Rome
1535 Lord Offaly’s rebellion in Ireland
1536 Anne Boleyn executed
1540 Act of Union with Wales
1541 Fall of Thomas Cromwell
1542 Kingdom of Ireland created
1543 Death of James V. Accession of Mary, queen of Scots
1544–46 England at war with Scotland and France
1547 England at war with Scotland and France
1547–50 Death of Henry VIII. Accession of Edward VI
1547–50 Renewed Anglo-Scottish war (‘Rough Wooing’)
1549 Rebellions across much of England. Protector Somerset falls
First reforming church council in Scotland
xviii  Chronology

1553  Death of Edward VI. Accession of Mary I
1554  Mary of Guise becomes Queen Regent of Scotland. England reconciled to Rome; Cardinal Pole returns
1555–58  Heresy executions in England
1558  Death of Mary I and Cardinal Pole. Accession of Elizabeth I
1559  ‘Elizabethan Settlement’ in England
1559–60  Reformation–rebellion in Scotland
1560  ‘Elizabethan Settlement’ in Ireland
1561  Mary, queen of Scots returns to Scotland from France
1567  Deposition of Mary, queen of Scots. Accession of James VI
1568–73  Civil war in Scotland
1568–87  Mary, queen of Scots a prisoner in England
1569  Rebellion of the northern earls
1570  Papal excommunication of Elizabeth I
1572  St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France
Admonition against the Parliament
1577  Archbishop Grindal sequestered over the prophesyings
1578–82  Anjou marriage negotiations
1581  First presbyteries created in Scotland
1584  ‘Black Acts’ in Scotland: James VI’s personal rule begins
1585  Act of Association in England
1585–1604  England at war with Spain
1587  Mary, queen of Scots executed
1588  Spanish Armada
1588–89  Martin Mar-Prelate tracts: crackdown against Puritanism
1595–1603  Nine Years’ War in Ireland against Hugh O’Neill, earl of Tyrone
1599  Earl of Essex’s failed expedition to Ireland
1601  Essex’s rebellion and execution
1603  Death of Elizabeth I. James VI succeeds to the English throne

Map 1  The Tudor and Stewart realms, 1485–1603
Living in early modern Britain

A lost world

The men and women who lived in Britain and Ireland five hundred years ago lived in a world which is lost to us. The difference is a matter not only of the material circumstances of their lives, but of their mental worlds and their imaginations. This is fundamental to any understanding of the religion, politics and society of the sixteenth century.

Imagine an English Rip van Winkle: a peasant who dozed off in the year 1500, overslept and woke up in the modern United Kingdom. He would find himself in an exceptionally strange world. It would be a world filled with giants: the average height of an adult male in the sixteenth century was scarcely over five feet. It would be (as he would notice very quickly) a world filled with food, food in unimaginable quantity and variety. In his own century, our peasant would have derived some 80% of his calorie intake from a single foodstuff - bread. It would be a world filled with light: he would have grown up with nights that were pitch black, and with artificial light that was dim, often prohibitively expensive and which stank. Indeed, the modern world would generally seem strangely devoid of smell - but filled with noise. Our sleeper's home country was normally quiet. Only thunderstorms, bells and those rare things, crowds, could make truly loud noises. Above all, the sheer numbers of people in the modern world would astonish him. Sixteenth-century England had a population density like that of Highland Scotland today. It was a country of scattered settlements and subsistence farmers. Agricultural productivity was low; a peasant family might need to farm a dozen acres simply to feed themselves. There was almost nothing that we would nowadays call a town. In 1500, London was the only settlement in Britain or Ireland with a population of more than 10,000 people. A handful more breached the 5,000 mark. Only around 3% of the population lived in such metropolises.

The makeup of modern crowds might unsettle him most of all. The numbers of elderly people (over forty) would be surprising. The lack of the visibly sick, crippled and deranged would be more remarkable. Positively
disturbing would be the lack of children. He would be familiar with a country where perhaps a third of the whole population was under the age of fifteen, and where babies and children were ever-present. To his eyes, the modern British would look like the survivors of a dreadful child-specific plague.

His world was both smaller and larger than ours. Smaller, for he lived - like some nine-tenths of England's population - in a community of a hundred or fewer households, often many fewer. He knew all his neighbours and they all knew him. Strangers were instantly recognised as such and treated with some suspicion. Anonymity was rare except in the towns. Even there, privacy in the modern sense scarcely existed, for most houses had more inhabitants than rooms, and their walls could rarely exclude prying eyes, let alone wagging ears. News from the outside world was, in rural areas, occasional and unreliable, although this was beginning to change. Government was distant: a face on a coin, a prayer in church for a king, quarter-sessions held by the county magistrates. More important were the parish priest, the churchwardens and the local lords or gentry. Roads existed, but were ill-maintained and hazardous. Water transport, the only practical means of moving heavy goods, was slow, and there were few navigable rivers. Travel of all kinds was arduous and dangerous.

And yet it was a larger world than our own because its vast emptiness could not be shut out. Britain and Ireland in 1500 were populated by between three and four million people, compared to some seventy million in the early twenty-first century. Wolves, bears and boars were long extinct, and the wild woods had mostly been tamed or chopped down, commemorated only in the towering forests of columns in the great Gothic cathedrals. Yet the natural world remained a place of fear. The notion that wild is beautiful is a very new idea, formed in an age when nature can be kept out by well-insulated walls. The long nights of winter, and the pervasive cold and enforced idleness that went with them, were annually marked by peaks in the death rate. And if there were no wild animals outside, there were wild men. Violent crime was ever-present and policing flimsy and informal. There were worse threats, too, out in the dark: fairies, witches, the Devil himself.

We might smile at such credulity, but the truth was that early modern life was by any standards dangerous and insecure. Life expectancy at birth was somewhere in the thirties, but this is misleading, since comparatively few people actually died at that age. The one significant group who did were mothers: some 6–7% of women died from complications of pregnancy or childbirth. Maternal mortality, however, was a fraction of infant and child mortality, and it is that universal tragedy which skews the statistics. In some times and places, as many as half of children born alive died before the age of fifteen. Those who survived this appalling cull and made it into their teens might, on average, expect to live into their late fifties. But this, too, is a deceptive figure. Old age was not especially uncommon: the tough and the lucky survived into their seventies or eighties. But death rates were high at every age. War and civil unrest regularly claimed civilian lives. By European standards, England escaped lightly, but in Scotland and especially in Ireland the toll of both large-scale and small-scale violence was appalling. War often also aggravated the ever-present problem of food shortages. England, at least, was free of real famine until the very end of our period, the hungry 1590s, but malnutrition was a constant possibility at the bottom of the social scale.

Other hazards were more universal. Simple accidents were a significant cause of death: in an age when water had to be fetched and carried daily, and when bridges were rickety and guardrails non-existent, accidental drowning claimed a great many lives. Those too grand to fetch water risked falling from horses. House fires killed frequently, and also, proverbially, reduced the prosperous to penury within minutes. Perhaps nothing would seem more alien to our sleeping peasant than the modern culture of ‘health and safety’. But most of the worst hazards were simply unavoidable by early modern means. Endemic disease and injuries of all kinds took a regular toll: everything from the new disease of syphilis, through the constant and often fatal problem of dental infections, to the biggest killer of them all, plague.

Plague and its aftermath

Bubonic plague and a series of related diseases arrived in Europe in the mid-fourteenth century without warning, nearly eight centuries after the last major pandemic. Between 1345 and 1352, the ‘Black Death’ killed a third or more of the population across an arc of territory stretching from India to Iceland. It was only the first of a series of outbreaks of plague, some local, some international, which persisted until the seventeenth century. Plague roughly halved the population of Britain and Ireland between 1345 and 1400. Thereafter the population stabilised, but plague continued to prevent a recovery: not by a steady cull, but in occasional large-scale outbreaks. A major visitation of the plague might strike once in a generation and could kill a third of the population of a city in a summer. Nor were rural communities immune. Most Europeans who reached adulthood would live through, or die in, an outbreak of plague.

This extraordinary catastrophe and its long aftermath hangs over the sixteenth century. It is not simply that outbreaks of plague continued to recur, alongside equally lethal epidemic and endemic diseases such as syphilis, influenza and the mysterious, terrifyingly fast killer known as the ‘English sweat’. The post-1350 collapse in population had obvious economic consequences: with fewer people sharing the same amount of land, landlords found themselves relatively impoverished, whereas peasants suddenly had something of a scarcity value. The aftermath of plague in Britain saw the near-total disappearance of serfdom and a boom in the peasantry’s living standards. This is sometimes known as the peasants’ golden age, but we should not get carried away. Peasant poverty had once been absolute and
was now merely grinding. Moreover, the price of the golden age was the ever-present threat of sudden, indiscriminating and exceptionally painful death.

The population finally began to rise again in the 1470s or 1480s, as plague slowly retreated and the birth rate rose. By 1500 the recovery was in full spate. The sixteenth century was almost a mirror of the post-plague period. The population rose rapidly: England’s population roughly doubled during the century, to over its pre-Black Death peak. The economy grew, too, but not quite so quickly, as more marginal land came back under cultivation. Land became scarcer, labour cheaper. Generalised inflation pushed up all prices across the century, driven both by a flood of Spanish gold and by population increase, but food prices outstripped others, and the prices of necessities rose faster than those of luxuries. Whatever else this century was, it was not a peasants’ golden age. The well-established inequality of wealth yawned ever wider. On one side of the gulf were landowners, a class which included the wealthiest peasants, the yeomen, who owned enough land to feed themselves and to produce some surplus. The landless were forced into ever-deeper penury. Increasing numbers fell out of the economy altogether, to become paupers and vagrants, a source of regular moral panics throughout the century.

It was a toxic mix of factors: inflation, continued large-scale plague, rising population and growing impoverishment. Of its many consequences, two are particularly worth noticing. The first is enclosure, a long-standing phenomenon which now accelerated dramatically. It is a polite term for an ugly process: landlords’ denying their tenants the use of lands which had previously been available for all (‘common land’) so that they could be farmed intensively for the landlords’ benefit. The most notorious form of enclosure was the conversion of low-quality arable land to sheep farming. Wool was England’s most important export, and sheep, as Thomas More put it, were devouring whole villages. In the long term, enclosure was the foundation of Britain’s later prosperity, since it made much more efficient farming possible. In the short term, however, it seemed to be a means of kicking the peasantry when they were down. The violation of long-standing precedent made its injustice obvious, especially when the wider economic and demographic changes were so imperceptible. Rural anger over enclosure regularly boiled over during the sixteenth century, with important consequences for both politics and religion, but it was not enough to stop the economic logic behind the process.

The second consequence of economic change was felt in the towns. In 1500 the islands’ only real city, London, numbered some 50,000 people, at least five times the size of its nearest rivals, Bristol and Norwich. The largest towns outside England, Edinburgh and Dublin, were smaller still. By 1600, London had swollen to some 200,000 souls, spilling well beyond the old City to begin the process of swallowing the surrounding counties. Other towns were growing too, although none could touch the capital. Such breakneck growth might look like prosperity, but often urban growth was a sign of despair. In the seething, insanitary conditions of early modern towns, death rates were usually significantly higher than birth rates. Towns only grew through migration from the countryside. The rising rural population left increasing numbers landless and (therefore) destitute: the towns were their only possible destination. Towns were where the rural poor came to die. As a result, the towns became cauldrons of ambition and desperation, churning the supposedly tidy social hierarchies of early modern Britain. They increasingly frightened the respectable elites who nominally ruled them, and who struggled with mixed success to impose moral and economic order. All this made the towns — and above all London — potential engines of social, political and religious instability.

Our long-sleeping peasant, therefore, was probably wise in choosing to snooze through the sixteenth century. In so doing, he avoided likely impoverishment, hunger and early death from any number of causes. Even if he lived into old age, he would likely have done so while suffering from chronic pain or illness of some kind, quite possibly including the virtually untreated problem of mental illness. He would, at least, be poor enough to escape the attentions of the medical profession, an elite who jealously guarded their monopoly, and whose prescriptions were usually unpleasant, frequently useless and occasionally fatal. He would likely fall back on the only painkiller known to the age: alcohol.

His sister would face a slightly different mix of dangers. Women were less likely to be murdered or to engage in certain exceptionally dangerous occupations (soldiering, seafaring, construction). In exchange, they faced the sex-specific danger of maternity, along with more exotic threats such as (later in the century) the faint possibility of being hanged for witchcraft. Yet for all that, women’s life expectancy was slightly better than men’s. This carried its own problems, because in an economy centred on male activity, widows were frequently left destitute. Indeed, women of all ages were more at risk of extreme poverty and malnutrition than men. These calamities drove women as well as men down the desperate path to the cities, which offered one route by which some women could survive: the thriving business of prostitution.

**Diversions and hopes**

We can only guess at what it was like to live in such a world, although it does seem that the ubiquity of childhood deaths did not dull the pain which bereaved parents felt. Yet sixteenth-century life was not unremittingly grim, nor did peasants pass their lives in earnest discussions of enclosure, inflation and mortality rates. The towns bubbled with diversions as well as with discontent. There were improving civic entertainments, such as mystery and morality plays. There were occasional events of real grandeur, especially in London or Edinburgh, which enjoyed periodic royal entries, coronations,
weddings or funerals. There were street traders and entertainers: jugglers, bear-baiters, barbers, minstrels, conjurors, salesmen, con-men. There was a booming book trade, of which we shall hear much more. And mixed with all the rest, shouting for attention, was the Church. The Franciscan friars, an urban order, had been described by their founder as God's minstrels, and their renown as preachers made them rivals for the best entertainment the secular world had to offer.

If the Church was one provider of entertainment in the towns, in the villages it had a near monopoly. The odd quack or ballad-seller might pass through, but the Church, with its highly visible stone buildings, was ubiquitous. Most people measured time not by days of the month, but by proximity to the major Christian festivals: not just Christmas and Easter, but dozens of holy days scattered through the year. The midsummer feast of St John the Baptist on 24 June was a particular highlight, marked by the lighting of bonfires. Such festivals could be raucous. The 'church ale' was one widespread custom: a kind of rowdy, alcohol-fuelled church fête, where the centrepiece was the sale of ale brewed by the churchwardens. Festivals were moments when the normal rules of society were suspended. They were a chance for the hungry to gorge and (a pastime which united all the British nations) to drink themselves into a violent stupor. But they also meant more active reversals of the social order. In a series of events which the social scientists call 'festivals of inversion', often at Christmastime, society's strict hierarchy was deliberately mocked and reversed. As a 1541 royal proclamation disapprovingly described these events:

Children be strangely decked and appareled to counterfeit priests, bishops, and women, and so be led with songs and dances from house to house, blessing the people and gathering of money, and boys do sing mass and preach in the pulpit.¹

Some feared that the election of boy-bishops on St Nicholas' Day, or May Queens on May Day, mocked the social hierarchy. In truth it probably reinforced it.

For while the material conditions of our peasant's life were growing steadily worse, he was not an oppressed proletarian yearning for revolution. Occasionally, he stopped playing at inventing the social order and set about doing it in earnest. Riots and even full-scale peasant rebellions did take place. But while early modern peasants could be sharply aware of injustice, they did not seek to remake their society. The common people's daydreams took forms like the fantasy land of Cockaigne: a place of permanent festival, where there was always food and never work. No one could conceive of a society whose backbone was not composed of agricultural labourers. Rebellion or riot usually targeted immediate, specific and limited grievances, and wore a conservative face: an attempt to restore matters to how they had once been. The archetype of the common man fighting for justice was the immensely popular figure of Robin Hood, the outlaw who remained loyal to the king. And while the Robin Hood stories mercilessly lampooned corrupt clerics and monks, most versions of the tale also stressed Robin's true piety. For it was the Church which was both the greatest force for social stability in the early modern world and also (potentially) the greatest threat.

The Church as an institution

The late medieval Church was, and was seen as, two things at once. It was a formidable, wealthy and bureaucratic institution. It was also the city of God and the body of Christ.

The structure

The Church's institutional face is easier to pin down. By 1500, the Church's institutions in western Europe were fully mature. The continent was geographically parcelled out into dioceses (administered by bishops), which were subdivided into parishes. There were seventeen dioceses in England, some of them very large and very wealthy by European standards; four in Wales, thirteen in Scotland and thirty-two (mostly small and impoverished) in Ireland. England and Wales comprised about 9,000 parishes, Scotland a further 1,000 and Ireland some 2,500. In theory, the network extended to every inhabited part of the islands. Most Christians met the Church principally in their parish.

A parish was a geographical area tied to a church building (the parish church) and overseen by a parish priest with responsibility for the residents' spiritual welfare ('cure of souls'). This system was not always as neat in practice as in theory. In the more remote, upland parts of Britain (although not in Ireland), parishes were sometimes vast and parish churches inaccessible, and subsidiary church buildings ('chapels of ease') were rare. The larger English cities had the opposite problem: tiny parishes. The square mile of the City of London contained more than 100 parish churches: in proportion to their populations, Norwich and York had even more. In such cities it was tempting to cross parish boundaries for churchgoing, and relatively easy to slip through the net and avoid churchgoing altogether. Yet with these provisos, the parish remained the basis both of most Christians' religion and of the Church's administration.

It was also the basis of the Church's finances. Although the late medieval church had a great many sources of income, including its vast landholdings, the bedrock of Church finance was the tithe. This was a levy which in theory required that one-tenth of all produce, of any kind, was owed to the parish church. In practice, many payments had been fixed or negotiated down. The payment of tithes still sparked disputes and tension, but surprisingly rarely: in any given year, it seems, fewer than 1% of parishes saw a tithe dispute
which went to court. This is partly because rules and traditions were well understood, but also because tithes were not simply taxes. Wills from this period routinely include a small bequest to the parish church in token of 'tithes forgotten': a sign of the sense of moral obligation behind tithing. The taxman rarely receives such unsolicited gifts.

Tithes were due to the rector, who in principle was a resident priest with responsibility for the cure of souls in the parish. A third was due to him personally, with the rest split between maintenance of the church building and support of the poor. Commonly, however, an institution – a monastery, a cathedral, or some other foundation such as a collegiate church – had acquired the rectory of a parish church. This process, known as impropriation, meant that the parish's tithes were siphoned off to that institution to support its work. The institution would then spend a portion of the money – often only a small fraction – to pay a priest actually to serve in the parish. This priest, running the parish vicariously on behalf of an institutional rector, was called a vicar. Impropriation was widespread in England (where some 40% of parishes were impropriate), more so in Ireland (60%) and the norm in Scotland (over 85%). Impropriation has not had a good press from historians, and it certainly had some malign consequences. But in principle it could be an excellent way of taking parishes' resources and using them to support other ecclesiastical institutions devoted to education, to the care of the poor or to prayer.

Impropriation was also only one of the ways in which money could be siphoned away from a parish. Simple absenteeism was another. A rector or vicar might use a parish merely as a source of income while appointing a more lowly priest actually to serve there as curate (or, indeed, neglect it altogether). Wealthy, remote parishes were particularly vulnerable to this. Pluralism – the practice of holding several posts ('benefices') in the Church simultaneously – was one obvious cause of absenteeism, but absenteees might also be students, or administrators, or in service to the king or a noble family. Such practices were technically banned, but bishops freely granted exemptions and offenders could often evade prosecution. Again, absenteeism was often a good use of resources, since it meant that deserving clerics could be found incomes, but there were obvious grounds for resentment and corruption.

The clergy

Who were these priests? In theory, men of good character and sound learning, over the age of twenty-five, who had been ordained by a bishop. Ordination was one of the seven sacraments of the Church (the rites which, it was believed, could reliably apply God's grace to a particular human situation). It set the ordained minority (the clergy, or clerics) apart from the rest (lay people, or the laity), marking them for God's service. There were well over 30,000 clergy in England in 1500, and the number was rising rapidly.

It was one thing to be ordained, however, and another actually to secure a benefice, that is, a post in the Church which would provide an income of some kind.

Every benefice had a patron – a person or institution who had the right to nominate priests to fill that benefice. The patron might be a monastery, a cathedral chapter, or a bishop; or it might be the king, or one of the nobility or gentry. Often, but not always, patrons were the heirs of former benefactors or founders. Patrons' rights to nominate were almost absolute. In principle, the local bishop could veto a patron's nominee, but this virtually never happened. Patrons, therefore, had considerable power, and here too was an opening for corruption. It was a serious offence for priests to bribe their way into benefices (the crime known as 'simony'), but it was also fairly widespread; and mere favouritism was perfectly legal. Moreover, the right of patronage to a benefice (the 'advowson') was, in law, itself a piece of property, which could be leased or sold. This structure, in England and Wales at least, was to be entirely unaffected by the Reformation – much to the dismay of the more idealistic reformers.

The most obvious benefices were parish rectories and vicarages, but less than a third of the clergy ever became parish priests of this kind. For the remainder, the most attractive alternatives were chantries or collegiate churches. Chantries were foundations endowed by private individuals to pray for their souls. Typically, a chantry would be attached to a parish church, and it would employ a priest on a modest stipend to say Mass for the founders' souls and for all Christian souls daily, 'in perpetuity' (meaning, until the money ran out). Like parochial benefices, appointment to chantry posts was usually for life. There were almost as many chantry posts as parochial ones. There were also other less lucrative and less secure posts. Priests might serve as tutors or chaplains in private households; or as curates, standing in for absentee clergy. There were guild or fraternity chaplaincies – employment by an organisation of laymen to provide them with religious services, employment which lasted as long as the employers' goodwill. And at the bottom of the ladder, there was the large clerical proletariat, those clergy who eked out a living saying occasional Masses and other services for anyone who would pay them to do so. The stereotype would have us believe that such men lurked around churches waiting to pounce on the visibly unwell, distressed or pregnant, pressing their services on them like snake-oil salesmen. This stereotype probably existed more in satirists' minds than in reality, but there is no doubt that large numbers of priests lived from hand to mouth. They might supplement their income by working as teachers, scribes, smiths, or even construction workers. Here, the sacramental barrier between clergy and laity blurred.

Few of these men were highly trained. A university education was exceptional: less than 10% of English and Scottish clergy were graduates, and they tended to cluster in the towns. In Ireland, which had no
Beyond the parish

The Church beyond the parish did not have much impact on the day-to-day lives of most lay people. The pope was a distant name, prayed for in the Mass. The bishop was a great lord who was often, at best, an occasional visitor to his diocese (some bishops, especially in Scotland, literally never set foot there). His officials were seen a little more regularly. They were supposed to conduct visitations in his name periodically, ensuring that good discipline was being maintained. It did not always happen: visitations depended on energetic and conscientious bishops, capable officials and—vitally—sound diocesan finances. In poorer dioceses such as those in Wales and much of Scotland, visitations were simply unaffordable. In Ireland, by contrast, visitations actually generated fees from the parishes and so might take place annually or even more often.

The Church courts were a more regular presence. Moral offenders of all kinds might find themselves there: heretics, witches, bigamists, those accused of defamation or embroiled in disputes over wills and bequests. Sometimes clergy denounced their disolute parishioners to the church courts, but more often it was a matter of lay people suing one another, or even of lay people suing clergy. Plaintiffs and defendants represented themselves, and the courts were accessible to the most ordinary of people. They were not criminal courts and could not impose the death penalty. (The partial exception to this was heresy cases, in which, squabbling, the Church required the secular government actually to conduct the execution.) They could, however, exact fines and penances or, in the last resort, excommunicate. That is, they could exclude obstinate offenders from the Church and from Christian society until they repented. Excommunicates were, in theory, ostracised during life and damned to Hell after death. In practice, the penalty was rarely taken quite so seriously—especially in Scotland, where its fearsomeness was badly devalued by overuse.

The other churchmen whom lay people routinely met were the 'religious', or the 'regulars': monks, nuns, friars, canons and others who followed a religious rule of life. A quarter or more of all clergy were 'religious' in this sense. (Those clergy who did not belong to religious orders were known as 'secular' priests.) There was no formal requirement that members of religious orders should be ordained, and female religious such as nuns could not be (women's ordination was not dreamt of). Yet by this period virtually all male religious were also priests. This was a hugely varied group. Alongside the traditional Benedictine and Cistercian orders of monks were the urban, preaching orders of friars, the Franciscans and Dominicans; newer, more scholarly orders such as the Augustinian canons; and many other, smaller orders, of whom the most renowned were the austere Carthusian monks. All told there were some nine hundred religious houses in England, not counting a few hermits or anchorites who set themselves up on an individual, do-it-yourself basis.

university of its own, the only graduate clergy were senior office-holders. 'Sound learning' meant simply being able to read the Latin service, which did not necessarily entail understanding it. A much-repeated sixteenth-century joke told of a priest who had long misread the word *sumpsum* in the Latin service, saying *mumpsimus* instead; when his mistake was pointed out to him, he reacted indignantly, denouncing this strange new *sumpsum* as a heretical innovation.² This sort of thing was good clean fun, but to focus on the educational shortcomings of the clergy is to miss the point. These men were not ordained chiefly to teach their flock, but to pray for them and to celebrate the sacraments on their behalf. It was not their learning that gave them their status, but their ordination. That status, that separation from normal human society, was marked in numerous ways. The clergy were supposed not to be subject to the criminal law, falling instead under the Church courts' own jurisdiction: a much-contested doctrine. Priests were usually given the courtesy title of 'Sir', the same as a knight in the secular world. (An unlettered priest might be mockingly called 'Sir John Lack-Latin'.) When performing their sacral functions, they wore holy garments, or 'vestments', derived from ancient Roman patterns. The colours of these vestments changed in harmony with those of altar-cloths and other church furnishings, with the seasons of the Church's year: a visible sign that the priest was not one of the people, but part of the Church itself. Priesthood was not a job from which one might retire, but a status which lasted for life. Being degraded from holy orders was an exceptional event, usually reserved for clergy who committed capital crimes. It was a medieval truism that one Pater-noster (the 'Lord's Prayer') said at a priest's behest had the same weight as 100,000 said by a lay person's own initiative—just one sign of the authority which was attached to priesthood.

Above all, priests were required to remain celibate for life. Clerical celibacy was not technically a doctrinal requirement of the Church, but it had long been an aspiration and from the eleventh century on it had hardened into an absolute rule. There were practical reasons for this, to do with the danger of clerical dynasties, but at heart it was a matter of holiness. Priests were set apart for God's work and needed to be pure; whereas most medieval Christians saw sexual activity of any kind as impure. Even for lay people, marriage was second best, recommended only for those too consumed by lust to remain celibate. Priests should be uncontaminated. Of course, not all priests agreed, and the rules were not always enforced. In Scotland and Wales, it was routine for clergy to live openly with concubines, and in parts of Ireland *de facto* clerical marriage was common. In England, where the Church's discipline was rather tighter, breaches of chastity tended to be occasional and surreptitious. The lust-filled priest, who seduces virtuous wives in confession and who prefers not to marry because he would rather have the run of all the beds in the parish, was an enjoyable literary stereotype but, it seems, something of a rarity in real life.
Many of these houses were already of many centuries’ standing. England and Scotland, at least, had seen relatively few recent foundations. This has been taken to imply that the religious orders were decaying, in anticipation of the Reformation, but that is an exaggeration: although individual houses fluctuated, the total numbers of religious were if anything still growing. It is true, however, that England was surprisingly indifferent to the main movement for renewal sweeping European monasticism in the fifteenth century. The ‘Observant’ movement was led by the Franciscan friars and insisted on returning to an austerely rigorous discipline. In most of Europe, the Observants had swept all before them by the early sixteenth century. In Ireland, a wave of Observant enthusiasm left only a third of Franciscan friaries in the hands of the more lax ‘conventuals’ by 1530 and led to the foundation of a hundred new friaries during the fifteenth century. In much of Europe, Observant movements swept the more traditional monastic orders too. England was almost untouched by all this. Both the English and the Scottish crowns supported the Observant Franciscans, support which saw six Observant houses founded in England from 1482 onwards. These Observants were widely revered, but nearly 90% of English friaries remained ‘conventual’. For good or ill, English monasticism in the years around 1500 was largely content with business as usual.³

So too, it seems, were their lay neighbours. Different religious orders interacted with the laity in different ways. The friars were actively engaged with urban life, and they included some of the Church’s most gifted preachers. Monks and nuns were more withdrawn, but this did not necessarily lessen their impact. Most monasteries housed shrines of some sort and were sites for pilgrimage, small- or large-scale; pilgrims could also expect some measure of hospitality from them. The houses of the Benedictine monks (the oldest order) were usually located in towns: a visible witness of a holier pattern of life, as well as an important source of poor relief. Other orders, notably the Cistercians, had fled the corrupting influences of the urban life; but like most religious, they were landowners on an impressive scale. (Monks vowed poverty as individuals, but monasteries, as collective entities, were often exceedingly rich.) A great many people were tenants or neighbours of religious houses. These were of course business relationships which could (in the way of things) go sour. However, the regulars’ place in society was ultimately defined not by their property portfolios but by their spiritual power. Their mere existence mattered even to those lay people who never laid eyes on them. It is here that we need to stop considering the Church as an institution and see it instead as the body of Christ on earth.

Parish Christianity

Inside the parish Church

We have already imagined a sixteenth-century peasant finding himself in the twenty-first century. Now picture his partner in this time-travelling exchange scheme, a modern Briton who stumbles into an English parish church in the year 1500. What would greet her eyes and ears?

We may think we know what medieval churches were like: cool, silent buildings of bare stone, dominated by organ, pulpit and altar, with perhaps a tang of incense. Yet those medieval churches which survive to our own day have undergone dramatic changes in the meantime. Late medieval churches were certainly cool – indeed, bitterly cold, with no heating and in an era which climate historians call the ‘Little Ice Age’. But plain grey stone, or whitewashed walls, are a post-Reformation novelty. Most medieval churches were a pageant of colour and decoration. Normally, the most splendid example of this painting was to be found above the chancel arch, which divided the nave (the laity’s church, the main body of the building where the congregation gathered) from the chancel (the holiest, easternmost part of the building). This wall typically bore a ‘doom’ painting: a vivid image of the Last Judgement, depicting Christ in glory, the resurrection of the dead and the saved being received into Heaven while demons dragged the damned down to Hell. Artistically they were uneven, but the point these paintings made was unmistakable. This moment of judgement was one at which all humanity would arrive. When it came, status and wealth would count for nothing. Doom paintings commonly showed kings and lords lining up to be judged with the rest and often facing damnation. It was a visible challenge: remember, in the midst of the hurly-burly of life, that this is where we are all going.

Yet the ‘doom’ was only a frame for the most startling image in the whole building, beneath the chancel arch: the rood loft. This object was in two parts. The base was a carved wooden screen, reaching from the floor to above head height and blocking off the chancel from the nave. The screen would include a door; it would also not be entirely solid, rather including gaps for the people to glimpse into the chancel, seeing as if through a glass darkly. It was the clearest visual symbol of the gulf between the clergy and the laity. But the screen was simply a display platform for the rood itself (‘rood’ being an old English word for a cross). Atop the rood screen, in every medieval church, was the same tableau: a life-size wooden image of the crucified Christ, flanked by life-size carvings of the Virgin Mary and of the apostle John, lamenting at Christ’s sufferings as he committed them to one another’s care. This direct, sometimes brutally vivid image of the dying Lord was at the heart of the church building. All lines of sight led to it. This was why Christians came to church: to see the Son of God himself.

Beyond the screen, at the east end of the chancel, was the sanctuary, enclosing the high altar. This is perhaps what would surprise our modern visitor the most, for the priest who entered the sanctuary to perform divine service was almost entirely cut off from his congregation. The words of the service (the liturgy) were in Latin, which few of the people understood. Later Protestants found this perverse, and many modern people do likewise. It is important, however, to understand that the liturgy was not only incomprehensible: it was also inaudible, for the priest, standing or kneeling with
his back to the people, behind a rood screen, would typically whisper or mutter the service – especially the most sacred parts of it. Why, after all, did the congregation need to hear and to understand him? He was not talking to them: he was talking to God on their behalf. It was enough for them to know that he was doing so.

Indeed, even during Sunday high Mass, congregational participation was piecemeal and occasional. Our modern visitor might be familiar with churches where the people sit in neat rows of pews and follow the order of service, joining in ‘Amens’, singing, and sitting to hear sermons and readings. The late medieval service, by contrast, was an opportunity for the laity to say their own private devotions. Those who were passably literate, and passably wealthy, might use the popular prayer books known as Books of Hours. These did not contain the same service as the priest was using in the sanctuary, but instead a version of the daily liturgy said by monks, adapted for lay use. Those with less literacy or less piety would spend their time in saying their own prayers; in meditating on the numerous improving sights of the church (the ‘doom’, the rood and other paintings and statues); in praying at the lesser altars devoted to particular saints, which were dotted around many churches; or in gossiping and conducting business 

They would move about the building as they did so, for very few medieval churches had pews or other fixed furniture. The floors were open, paved with the gravestones of those who were wealthy enough to be buried within the church building itself. Those who moved from altar to altar did so over the memento mori of the pious dead. The sound of the Mass was therefore not silence, nor the loud voice of the priest ringing out, but a constant low hubbub of prayers, conversation and the noise of babies and children. Churchwardens would try to keep proceedings under control: as would dog wardens, the unsung heroes of the premodern church, whose job was to expel those stray dogs who caused a nuisance.

High Mass began with a bidding prayer (in the people’s native language) and ended with a blessing, but for most of the rest of the service, the priest and congregation left one another alone. The liturgy might call for responses, or singing, but participation was limited to the choir or the acolytes who joined the priest in the chancel. The low rumble of a massed congregational ‘Amen’ was never heard until the Reformation. Where there was music, it was performed, not participated in: plainchant or polyphony by choirs with a degree of expertise, some of whom might be priests themselves.

Our modern visitor might also be perplexed by the sermon, nowadays an invariable fixture of almost any church service. Sermons at Mass were unusual, although perhaps growing less so. Some clergy would deliver what they called a homily, meaning a short address of perhaps ten minutes during the Mass. But full-scale preaching was a specialist skill to which most clergy did not aspire. Indeed, it required a special licence from the bishop. Parishes were more likely to hear a sermon from a friar or other itinerant visitor than their own priest. These sermons were not for the faint-hearted. They were typically set-piece, standalone events, and not part of a wider service: addresses topped and tailed with prayers, which typically lasted one hour and could exceed two. This called for real skill from the preacher, and real stamina from both preacher and audience, especially when the only amplification was a sounding-board and when artificial hearing aids did not exist at all. In theory, every parish in western Christendom was supposed to hear a full-scale sermon at least four times per year. In practice this varied. Urban ones were commonplace. In London, the Sunday sermon at the great open-air pulpit of St Paul’s Cross was timed so that the devout of the city could attend Mass in their parishes and then come to the sermon afterwards. We rarely have evidence of the practice in more rural areas. In 1540–41, the bishop of Lincoln, John Longland, launched a systematic investigation of preaching in his huge diocese. The results show that, of 113 parishes for which figures survive, 109 heard four or more sermons during the twelve months surveyed. Of the four which fell short, only one had no preaching at all, and that village had been hit by plague that year. Yet these figures are not quite as glowing as they look. Of those 109 parishes, eighty-one had only the bare minimum of four sermons. Even when the parish priests themselves were the preachers, they usually stopped at four. And this was in a relatively wealthy part of England which was enjoying the focused attention of an activist bishop. It would be fair to conclude that most parishes – except perhaps in remote or upland areas – did hear sermons every so often; but that in most parishes – except in towns – they were occasional treats.

The Mass and its meaning

The heart of the parish church was not the pulpit (if there was a pulpit), but the high altar. The word altar was used precisely: this was a consecrated stone used for sacrifice. That sacrifice was known as the Mass, or, sometimes, simply ‘the sacrament of the altar’. It is the Catholic form of the Christian sacrament variously known as the Eucharist, Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper. The Mass was absolutely central to Catholic life and devotion. It is impossible to understand late medieval religion, or the events of the sixteenth century, without some understanding of the Mass.

The Gospels describe how, at the Last Supper, hours before his death, Christ gave bread and wine to his disciples; told them to eat and drink; and stated that the bread and wine were his body and his blood. Finally, he told his disciples to repeat this action in memory of him. Such repetitions have been central to Christian worship since the earliest times; but their meaning is less clear. The early Church certainly regarded the ritual as intensely holy and believed that Christ was present at celebrations of this sacrament in some particular way. One did not participate in it lightly, for fear of eating and drinking damnation on oneself. However, there was a range of understandings of precisely what was going on, a range which remained remarkably broad for over a thousand years. Only in the thirteenth century
did the western Church declare a formal orthodoxy on the subject, and even that left more leeway than is sometimes recognised. This orthodoxy, driven by reverence for the sacrament, took almost as high a view of it as possible. It was this view which was taught and – largely – believed across western Christendom by 1500.

The Catholic Mass was defined by two key, linked beliefs, both of which would become intensely controversial during the sixteenth century. First is the famous doctrine of transubstantiation, which holds that whenever a duly ordained priest correctly celebrates Mass, God performs a miracle. The bread and wine offered on the altar are physically transformed into the risen, glorified but fully human body of Christ. To be precise, their substance – their essence – is transformed (in Aristotelian philosophy, substance is an exact term); only their ‘accidents’ remained, that is, the outward appearance of bread and wine. To claim that a dramatic but undetectable miracle takes place so routinely can obviously stretch credulity, and an undercurrent of scepticism about it surfaces intermittently in the late medieval period. But there were powerful reasons for believing it. It made philosophical sense: nowadays, too, we believe counter-intuitive doctrines (such as the existence of atoms) because learned authority assures us they are true. Transubstantiation was a simple, literal interpretation of Christ’s numinous words: ‘This is my body’. It was also an immensely attractive idea. It meant that when the sacrament was celebrated, Christ was physically, literally present in the most direct way possible; and moreover, that when believers ate the transsubstantiated bread, the substance of Christ actually became part of them.

The second key part of the doctrine of the Mass is the belief that it is a sacrifice. All Christians believe that Christ’s death was in some sense a sacrifice, atoning for the sins of humanity; and that that sacrifice was unique and unrepeatable. However, in Catholic eyes, when Mass is said, that unrepeatable sacrifice is made immediately present. (Hence the description of the consecrated bread as the ‘Host’, from the Latin hostia, or sacrificial victim.) Moreover, the Mass applies the merits of that sacrifice directly to the people – not just those who receive communion (that is, who actually eat the Host themselves) but also those who witness the event and those who, though physically absent, are prayed for during the service.

Congregations did not, therefore, come to Mass to hear the priest say the liturgy, or to be edified by a sermon. It was not an educational event. The Mass was about laying hold of God’s power. In the jargon, it was a means of grace: a channel through which forgiveness, salvation, healing (both spiritual and, sometimes, bodily) and perhaps more worldly benefits could be obtained. It was also the closest that Catholics came in this life to the glory of God, for the Mass is the point at which Heaven touches earth and at which God incarnate, once for all, lays down his life for humanity. It is the power and the glory, and the beating heart of Catholic devotion.

To eat the body of Christ was a fearsome thing, not to be undertaken lightly. Careful preparation was needed. This meant a full, formal confession of sins to a priest, who would then impose appropriate penances and pronounce absolution. Only then, with one’s soul wiped clean, could one receive Christ’s body without condemning oneself. Moreover, one was supposed to fast before receiving, to ensure that the sacrament did not mingle with corruption in the gut. Then, after passing through the rood screen into the chancel, one received kneeling. The priest placed the Host directly into one’s mouth, for profane hands could not touch it. As for the wine, Christ’s blood: the laity never came near it. It had become an invariable practice across Catholic Europe that only the priest who was actually presiding at Mass received both the bread and the wine. This looked to later generations like clericalist exclusivity, but its origins (which are mysterious) probably lie in lay humility. Those who were taking the appalling risk of exposing themselves to Christ’s piercing holiness would hardly want to do so a second time unnecessarily: and since the theologians assured them that the spiritual benefits were the same even if one received only ‘in one kind’, it could seem like a damnable presumption to demand ‘both kinds’. Or perhaps it is simply because the risk of spilling wine, and so defiling Christ’s blood, was too great. Whatever the origin of the custom, by 1500 the laity had been receiving in only one kind since time out of mind.

All this meant that receiving communion was a rarity. The obligation on all good Christians was to do so once a year, at Easter. More frequent communion was a rarefied practice for the unusually pious. So when the laity attended Mass week by week – and most of them did – it was as spectators. The sacrifice which the priest re-presented on the altar availed for them whether or not they received. The climax of the service was the elevation, when the priest lifted the Host above his head in a gesture of adoration. Often he stood before a dark backdrop, so that the holy white circle could be clearly seen by the people. They glimpsed the body of Christ through the rood screen, framed by the image of the crucified Christ above it, and the image of Christ in glory above that. There was a widespread belief – tolerated if not encouraged by the Church – that to set one’s eyes on the Host protected one from the danger of sudden death for the rest of that day. It testifies to the power of that moment, almost the only moment when the whole churchful of people were united in a single action: gazing, quite literally, on the body of their Saviour.

The living and the dead

It was not only those present in church who were thus united. The Mass is a sacrament of unity, drawing together all believers, including the dead. And in late medieval Christianity, the dead were a vividly important part of that community, at the forefront of believers’ minds. In a time of plague and unpredictable dangers, this was perhaps unsurprising. Medieval tombs often sport grimly morbid decoration, grinning skulls reminding the viewer that death is our universal fate. The late medieval obsession with death was
not nihilistic wallowing, however; rather, a focused and practical concern. For death was the gateway to the Last Judgement, that dreadful division of humanity which was depicted so starkly above the chancel arch: Heaven, for the saints who were purified from their sins; Hell, for the impenitent and the unbelievers. In either case, Christ's judgement would be eternal and irrevocable.

Yet most Christians did not feel themselves to fall into either of these two extremes. This seems to have been behind the rise (during the medieval period) of a subtle complication to this fearsome simplicity: the doctrine of Purgatory. Based on some powerful theological reasoning and a rather more slender Biblical foundation, this doctrine offered hope to Christians who were neither incorrigible sinners nor especially heroic in their virtues. Those who died with sins unconfessed or with penances unperformed might hope for admission to Purgatory rather than condemnation to Hell if the sins were not too grave, and the sinner was repentant. Purgatory was, literally, a place of purgation, where the sin-stained soul could gradually be cleansed until it was able to stand before God. It was therefore a place of tribulation. The purging process was assumed to be a painful one, and the torments of Purgatory were comparable to those of Hell. The vital difference was that Purgatory was temporary, and once the process of purging was complete – however many aeons it might take – the purified soul was guaranteed an eternal bliss of Heaven.

Naturally enough, most Christians – who hoped they did not deserve Hell and who did not aspire directly to Heaven – expected, on their deaths, to find themselves in Purgatory, having the accumulated muck of their earthly sins slowly scraped away by suffering. As a result, Christian practice increasingly concentrated on the practical question of how to reduce the time spent suffering in Purgatory – not only one's own expected future sufferings, but the sufferings which those Christians who were already dead were assumed to be enduring even now. Of course, to minimise one's own time in Purgatory, the most effective strategy was to avoid sin and to be scrupulous in confession and penance. But this was only the beginning. One could also do penances on behalf of the dead, to speed them through Purgatory. To go on pilgrimage in memory of one's parents, for example, was a means not simply of honouring them but of doing them a real and practical service. One travelled to the shrine of a particular saint in order to ask that saint to intercede with God on behalf of a soul suffering in Purgatory.

And here the Mass became indispensable. If the Mass was the premier channel for applying God's saving power to human need, there was no greater help to souls in Purgatory than to say Mass on their behalf. Every Mass included general prayers for the faithful departed, but it was possible to be much more specific. Those whose souls were tainted by the possession of money might make good that predicament by making provision for Masses to be said for them after their deaths: paying a priest to say one, a dozen, thirty Masses; leaving an endowment which paid for Mass to be said monthly, or annually; or, for the seriously wealthy, endowing a perpetual chantry which would employ a priest to say Mass for the souls of the founders every day. The numbers could be dizzying. King Henry VII's will required 10,000 Masses to be said for his own and for other souls. The poor might have envied such a formidable effort, but could take comfort from the assumption that they were already closer to Christ, and that their prayers had particular power.

Even the greatest private foundations, however, were dwarfed by those enormous engines of prayer, the monasteries. Originally, monasteries had been seen as existing principally for the benefit of the monks themselves, as they wrestled with sin and strove for holiness. They were withdrawing from the world, not taking up a role within it. Yet the world would not let them go, and the more austere their holiness, the more the laity wanted a piece of it. Bluntly, holy men (and women, to a lesser extent) attracted financial support from more worldly believers. This had, over the centuries, made Britain's monastic houses immensely wealthy landowners (the Irish houses were rather poorer). It also ensured that prayer for the souls of their benefactors, and for all Christian souls, had insensibly become their primary purpose. At least, the laity valued the monasteries above all as powerhouses of prayer, a ministry which the monks carried out on behalf of the whole Church.

In practice, by 1500, prayer for the dead dominated Catholic devotion in much of northern Europe. The primary driver of this was demand from the laity. Although the Church gave lay people no formal voice in its government, lay people could still shape its priorities, not least because they provided its funding. The Church was turning into a vast network of prayer for the dead because this was what its people wanted from it.

Here, indeed, is one of the most important characteristics of late medieval Christianity: the depth of genuine popular engagement with it. It is true that this was a highly clericalised religion, with its sacred texts confined to Latin and with little formal preaching. Yet this did not mean that the laity were excluded from or ignorant of their religion. The use of a sacred and inaccessible language in worship is a feature of religious traditions the world over (Protestantism’s aversion to this is very unusual). The laity may not have been able to translate the liturgy verbatim, but they knew what it signified. When (as almost everyone did) they learned to recite their Latin prayers – the Paternoster, the Ave Maria, the Credo – they could not have provided literal translations, but they understood the gist and the power of the words they were using. The visual images that surrounded them in church expounded the core doctrines of creation, incarnation, atonement, penance, purgatory and judgment. An old cliché held that such images were ‘books for laymen’. Those whose grasp of the faith was uncertain were subject to an annual corrective in the form of confession. Sacramental confession (which was conducted face-to-face; confessional boxes did not yet exist) was an occasion for teaching and admonition as well as for rehearsing lists of sins.
The religion of the laity was not always what respectable theologians would have wished. Important subtleties might be missed. Some lay people had a tendency to see the Church's sacraments and ceremonies as near-magical. The sign of the cross could protect against evil; a funeral Mass said on behalf of a living person could curse them. Yet we should not imagine a gulf between a superstitious lay religion and a rational clerical one. Belief in miracles, and in the power of sacraments and ceremonies to aid good Christians in this life, was perfectly orthodox. While the Church frowned on, and periodically disciplined, those who bent its rituals to blatantly magical purposes, it also robustly asserted that those rituals could bring worldly as well as spiritual benefits.

Measuring the depth and breadth of lay commitment to parish religion is not easy. Compliance with legal obligations, or lip-service paid in wills, in itself tells us very little. A more significant index, perhaps, is money. The willingness of individuals and communities to bestow serious amounts of cash on the Church is impressive. Beyond their (already extensive) obligations to pay tithes and other dues, lay people dug deep into their threadbare pockets to pay for the edification and beautification of their parish churches, and for sumptuous vestments and expensive service-books for their clergy. They spent their time caring for church property (it was common for rural churches to own livestock, cared for by parishioners and providing an income for the church). They served as churchwardens – an unpaid and arduous office. These measures, of necessity, tell us nothing about those who were too poor to contribute anything. Yet at the least, they tell us that many – most? – people felt some ownership of their parish church, and indeed of their Church as a whole. This implicit covenant would be broken during the sixteenth century, but not by the people.

Satisfaction and dissent

**Heresy**

In 1500, Catholic Christianity was the universal religion of Britain and Ireland. Every child who survived the first few minutes of life was baptised. There was no genuine paganism left, even if some pagan festivals and sites had been Christianised. In theory, there were also no Jews, the Jews having been expelled from England in 1291. In fact, tiny underground Jewish communities do seem to have had a foothold in sixteenth-century London, but the numbers were minuscule and they remain as invisible to historians as they did to contemporaries.

What England and (to a lesser extent) Scotland did have was heretics: men and women who consciously and deliberately defied the Church's teachings. Heresy greatly alarmed contemporaries and has greatly interested historians, but it is not clear that either reaction is justified. It is true that heresy could balloon into mass disobedience, schism and armed revolt. This is what happened in Germany in the 1520s, following Martin Luther's condemnation for heresy. Something similar had happened a century earlier in Bohemia, where a Czech national movement led by the dissenting cleric Jan Hus had exploded into revolution after Hus was executed for heresy. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the heresy known as Catharism or Albigensianism had taken deep root in southern France and northern Italy and had been suppressed only after a brutal and prolonged military effort.

But not all heresy was like this. There were two distinct but overlapping kinds of heresy in Britain and Ireland in the fifteenth century, neither of which posed an existential threat to the Catholic Church. The less dangerous, older and more universal problem was of simple rationalist scoffing, curiosity and incredulity. Periodically lay people were hauled before the Church courts for claiming that there is no God; that everyone without exception goes to Heaven; that Christ was a deceiver and a whore's son; or that priests are thieves and tricksters. Such claims were not usually advanced as sober philosophical claims, but made in the heat of alehouse profanity or anticlerical fury. They frequently smack more of bravado than truth-seeking. Or, indeed, of madness: there is little to distinguish these cases from others in which suspects claimed to be Christ, or the Devil. Such blasphemies were taken seriously by the Church, and indeed, we have no way of knowing how large an iceberg of doubt lay hidden beneath these occasionally visible tips. These people were not offering a serious or coherent challenge to the Church's doctrines, but they were reacting against its power over their lives and morals. They were not so much a live danger as an ever-present reminder that the ideal of Christendom could never be truly realised in a society with a full complement of the orneriness, the self-righteousness, the embittered, the independent-minded and the borderline insane.

More serious was the second variety of heresy, the movement known as Lollardy. The Oxford theologian John Wyclif, who died in 1384, had been biting critical of Catholic orthodoxy and had proposed some sweeping reforms. He condemned the wealth and institutional authority of the Church as un-Christian; he disputed the doctrine of transubstantiation; and he argued that the Bible, whose importance he stressed, should be available in vernacular translations rather than kept exclusively in Latin. The institutional church, he believed, was little more than a parody of the true, invisible Church known only to Christ, in which the poor were the greatest and the most virtuous Christian was the rightful pope. Wyclif was driven out of the university, but it was only after his death that a movement based on a simplified and radicalised version of his ideas began to spread across England. These dissidents – known to their enemies as Lollards, or 'numblers' – proceeded to act on Wyclif's ideas, not least by producing an English translation of the Bible. They won some support amongst the social elites and the clergy. In the late 1390s and early 1400s, Lollardy briefly looked like a real danger. In 1401 a sweeping set of anti-heresy laws were
introduced, which for the first time in England permitted unrepentant or relapsed heretics to be executed by burning.

Yet the Lollards’ threat fizzled almost into nothing. A farcical attempted rebellion in 1414 robbed them of any remaining respectability. They were driven out of the universities. A handful were executed, but most Lollards denounced their heresies when arrested, often abjectly. It turned out that this was a movement without much fire in its belly. Improbably, however, it survived to become an established irritant on the British religious scene. From a set of idiosyncratic academic disputes, it turned into a heresy of peasants and artisans, losing Wyclif’s theological sophistication even as it honoured his name and read books which were ascribed to him (often falsely).

Underground, Lollardy survived in pockets across England for more than a century and was eventually absorbed by Protestantism. There was even a Lollard presence in Ayrshire, in southwest Scotland. (There is little trace of it in Wales and none in Ireland.) In England, Lollardy hung on in cities such as London, Bristol and Coventry; in rural Essex, Kent, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire; and above all in the Chiltern hills of Buckinghamshire, the only area where Lollards seem to have formed a significant proportion of the population. Beyond the Chilterns, Lollardy was a numerically tiny phenomenon. We can name only a few hundred real Lollards, and they do not seem to have been the tip of a very large iceberg. Nevertheless, they had a stubborn durability. Official efforts against heresy lost much of their drive during the mid-fifteenth century, but when they revived under the Tudors they found a persistent, low-level Lollard presence, often in the same villages as two generations before.

What was a Lollard? Lollardy had no creed, no structures and no clergy. It was not a parallel church: Lollards had their children baptised by the parish priest like anyone else, and there is no evidence of Lollards attempting to celebrate sacraments for themselves. They typically did not absent themselves from their parish churches, even as they despised what happened there. What they did do was gather in each other’s houses, or in other safe places, to read to one another and to discuss doctrine. Reading was probably the closest thing Lollardy had to a sacred act; one result is that Lollardy has left us an amazingly rich text of textual remains. None of their books was printed until the 1520s, but the handwritten volumes were treasured, copied and recopied. They included a complete cycle of sermons which could be read in such illicit gatherings. Above all, Lollards read the English Bible, as translated by Wyclif’s disciples in the 1390s.

They did not withdraw from the Church, but they did despise it. In fact, their contempt for it seems to have been part of what drove them. Lollards were parasites on the Church, both hostile to and dependent on their host. Or, to use another image, they were conspiracy theorists, whose beliefs were animated by what they rejected. They deployed a flat-earther’s commonsense rationalism to deny that any object, place or person could be holy. Priests were false. Church buildings had no use aside from keeping the rain off.

Images, paintings, holy water, the saints and the sacraments were all tricks and nonsense. The only true images of Christ were the poor, and Christians ought to give to them rather than go on pilgrimage to gawp at rotting bones and line the pockets of greedy, sodomitical monks. The Mass, in particular, was mocked: Lollards denied transubstantiation in the bluntest terms, in contrast to Wyclif’s subtlety. Indeed, crude mockery of the Church was a Lollard habit. This kind of thing could easily shade into simple rationalist scepticism, and indeed the authorities did often conflate the two. But there were some specifically Lollard themes. Images were stocks and stones; the Virgin Mary was a whore; holy water was piss; confessing to a priest was as useless as confessing to a post. One Kentish Lollard was arrested for claiming that the Host was mere bread, and that ‘the knave priests did receive it before noon, and did piss and shit it at whores’ arses in the afternoon’.

Such talk was as impotent as it sounds. The significance of Lollardy is not that it threatened to overthrow the establishment; nor that it was a spring-board for the Reformation, a role in which its contribution was real but modest. If Lollardy was a parasite, it was a minor one: a recurrent infestation of fleas, a persistent annoyance that could not be exterminated but which did not pose an existential threat. Its main importance lies in the way it changed its host’s behaviour. By 1500, the Church in both England and Scotland saw the suppression of heresy as one of its key missions. Heretics were an enemy within, against whom the Church and respectable society defined themselves. ‘Heretic’ was a routine term of abuse, even in matters that had nothing to do with religion. In Scotland, where the real problem of heresy was somewhere between marginal and illusory, the Church had developed a hair-trigger readiness to deploy the accusation of heresy against any perceived slights or opposition. The English Church was slower to resort to this charge (with notorious exceptions). However, the pursuit of heresy had become one of the ways in which the Church asserted and maintained its power. When a new archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, took up office in 1511, his first substantial act was a drive against heretics. At least thirty suspects were tried in the diocese of Canterbury that year, and five executed. The purpose of this purge, however, was not to exterminate heresy (much as Warham disliked heretics); rather, it was to stamp the new archbishop’s authority onto his diocese. Other bishops did the same. It was not simply that heretics were useful whipping-boys. The reason the most earnest and forward-looking bishops were the most avid heresy-hunters is that they saw suppressing heresy as one of their most fundamental pastoral responsibilities.

By the early sixteenth century, the Church across much of Europe had assumed a heresy-hunting stance. There was never a formal Inquisition established in Britain or Ireland, as there was in Spain or Italy; pursuing heretics was up to individual bishops. Yet the English and Scottish Churches were unusually jumpy about criticism and suspicious of novelty. The Lollard infestation had, like many minor infections, triggered a sharp reaction
from the Church’s immune system. Not everything that was swept up by this reaction was heresy.

The most vivid sign of this was the matter of the Bible. Lollards’ advocacy of English-language scriptures resulted, not in an alternative, officially sponsored English Bible, but in a blanket ban. The Bible was freely available in most other European languages, but not in English. In principle, owning a Wycliffite Bible was presumptive evidence of heresy. In practice, criminalising the Bible in this way was both hard to justify and hard to police. A growing body of pious, orthodox lay folk who could read English but not Latin wanted to read the Bible, and the Wycliffite text was the only one available. So they read it, in large numbers. Religious houses owned copies. London’s fiercely orthodox Carthusian monks presented a copy to King Henry VI. Many surviving Wycliffite Bibles (and they survive in huge numbers) include marks of orthodox use, such as tables of the readings used at Mass Sunday by Sunday. Orthodox use of the Wycliffite Bible was an open secret, and such readers could expect to be left alone. But this awkward and unstable arrangement did more than provide an opening which later Protestant Bible-sellers could exploit. It helped to spread the notion that earnest piety and dutiful obedience to the Church might not lead on the same direction. And it may have helped spread an alarming phenomenon on which heresy-hunters in Kent and elsewhere remarked: orthodox believers and their heretical neighbours who did not revile one another, but coexisted and even shared some of the same religious instincts. Persecution was already intertwined with a measure of toleration.9

‘Anticlericalism’

The dangers which lay down this road were exemplified by a notorious scandal which broke in London in 1514. Whether Richard Hunne was really a Lollard is almost beside the point: he certainly had Lollard connections and, for what that is worth, owned a Wycliffite Bible. His argument with his parish priest in Whitechapel from 1511 onwards was not, however, about doctrine. Hunne’s infant son had died, and he refused to hand over the boy’s winding-sheet to the priest in lieu of a mortuary fee: a traditional, wholly legal, but often-waived and undoubtedly insensitive demand. The argument took a while to escalate, but Hunne was obstinate on the matter. By the end of 1512 he was being treated as an excommunicate and sued the priest for defamation. He cannot have been surprised that this ended with his facing a heresy charge. But by the time of his imprisonment in October 1514 he had already attracted a good deal of sympathy in London. Whether, as Archbishop Warham’s men claimed, Hunne hanged himself in his cell on 4 December, or whether he was murdered, is now unprovable: none of the various alternative accounts is particularly satisfactory. What matters is that London opinion was sufficiently outraged that a coroner’s jury found, sensationally, that Hunne had been murdered; and in the meantime, the Church proceeded serenely with a posthumous heresy prosecution. The law was on their side, and in the end the Church not only saw off any attempted retribution but blocked a parliamentary attempt to prevent Hunne’s goods being forfeited to the Church as a suicide. But the affair left a nasty taste far beyond those who shared Hunne’s presumed heresies.

In a scandal such as this, the Church could appear clannish, aggressive, grasping and driven chiefly by institutional self-interest. This used to be woven into an argument that ‘anticlericalism’, or hatred of the clergy, pervaded late medieval society. This view no longer seems tenable. Colourful literary depictions of corrupt or licentious priests, by Geoffrey Chaucer and others, are much cited, but their significance is another matter. If these depictions were shocking enough to be entertaining, perhaps they are evidence that this kind of priest was rare. In any case, jokey stereotypes can take on a life of their own largely detached from reality, as lawyers and mothers-in-law know. There were certainly real and sometimes bitter disputes between clergy and lay people. There were recurrent flashpoints, including money, the alleged abuse of heresy accusations, and clashes of jurisdiction between the church courts and their secular counterparts; what made the Hunne case so toxic was that all three of these were in play. But does this amount to anticlericalism?

The term itself was coined in the nineteenth century, when liberal and nationalist movements in France and elsewhere saw the clergy as a class as oppressors and barriers to change. Anticlericalism in that organised, conscious sense did not exist in the sixteenth century. What certainly existed was antagonism towards some individual priests. In some cases, this translated into a generalised contempt for the clerical estate as a whole: this is particularly the case in Scotland, where widespread corruption and indiscipline did mean that many lay people despised the clergy. But this did not mean that Scotland, still less England, was simmering with revolutionary resentment. There was no obvious path leading from contempt for the clergy’s abuses to a rejection of the Church – any more than modern contempt for lawyers leads to a rejection of the rule of law. Indeed, much of what was labelled ‘anticlericalism’ has been more aptly described as ‘hyperclericalism’: demanding high, sometimes impossibly high, standards from the clergy, and so deploring the actual priests who failed to meet them. The most insistent hyperclerical critics were not carping lay folk, but priests who were trying to galvanise their brethren to live up to the height of their calling. ‘Anticlericalism’ of this kind may be a sign, not of a weak Church, but of a Church which is successfully and actively policing itself. Even beyond that point, it is a normal by-product of Christian life, not a sign of a Church facing a crisis.

Clerical corruption, and disputes between the clergy and the laity, were commonplace in Scotland. They were much less so in England, although there are still a great many examples. (By contrast, much of the Irish Church was so thoroughly subordinated to lay interests that conflict scarcely arose.)
In Scotland, matters may even have been deteriorating, as the Church came more nakedly under royal control. In England, they were probably improving. These problems were endemic and universal in Christendom and did not mean that the medieval Church was on the point of collapse. Of course, we know that the medieval Church did collapse in the sixteenth century – or at least that it was demolished. But we are not justified in working backwards from that fact and concluding that routine friction between clergy and laity in the fifteenth century somehow exploded into open war in the sixteenth.

Is this subject therefore unimportant? Not entirely. If anticlericalism did not presage disaster, it did reveal some of the Church’s fault lines and points of weakness. The particular grievances of the secular lawyers and merchants who rallied to Hunne’s defence may not have had much resonance in the wider country, but they were a powerful constituency in their own right, and would decisively shape the century to come. Likewise, the willingness of some clergy harshly to criticise their own church was important. John Colet, the dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, gave a notoriously forthright address to the Convocation of Canterbury in 1510, starting what his allies (including the soon-to-be archbishop, William Warham) hoped would be a major campaign against clerical irregularity and indiscipline. In the event, the results of Colet and Warham’s moral crusade were predictably mixed: some abuses were dealt with and some incremental change achieved, but the transformation implied by their rhetoric was never going to be possible. However, that rhetoric of transformation, coming from such leading figures, helped to legitimise criticism and dissatisfaction from the clergy, and a generation later this would become important. ‘Reform’ – itself a thoroughly, admirably orthodox aim – could also become a cloak for all manner of other ambitions. Anyone with a grudge against the Church could use this kind of language to launch an attack which might win a hearing from otherwise good Catholics. And the Church’s rigorous self-criticism – while laudable – meant that it was hard for such attacks to be met with an equally robust defence.

Meanwhile, the Church’s actual failures (limited as they were) weakened its defence mechanisms. The shortage of preaching made perfect sense in terms of Catholic doctrine, with its emphasis on the sacraments, but this was an arrangement much better suited to situations of religious tranquility than of controversy. The fact that most clergy were neither prepared nor permitted to preach created a gap in the religious market which could plausibly be filled by dissent. Lightly educated clergy could still be excellent pastors and ministers of the sacraments, and they could mobilise the Church’s bureaucracy against open dissent. However, they were ill-equipped to defend the orthodox faith in their parishes. The Church’s resources were spread too thin for it easily to repel a broad-based assault.

In the face of the Lollard threat, these weaknesses had not proved too dangerous (although without them, Lollardy might well have been exterminated entirely). Yet the Lollard threat had been dealt with largely by anathematising and excluding it. Those clerics who had tried actually to debate with Lollards risked being accused of heresy themselves. This was the fate of Reginald Pecock, bishop of Chichester in the 1450s, who had written books in English against the Lollards. The very act of trying to engage with heretics was suspect, as it was seen to legitimise them. In the fifteenth-century context, Pecock’s approach was probably mistaken. Debate carries its risks. In the sixteenth, when a much more serious heretical threat appeared, the persistent reluctance of Catholics to engage directly with it would prove a dangerous weakness.

The English, Scottish and Irish Churches were not groaning under clerical oppression during the late fifteenth century. The clergy’s undoubted shortcomings attracted some contempt and some hostility, but this is easy to exaggerate and was not revolutionary. These were not countries where there was a Reformation waiting to happen. But the tensions which did exist between the clergy and laity – more so, the tensions amongst the clergy themselves – did provide fault lines. It was not inevitable that the Church would subsequently break along those fault lines; in fact, it was unlikely that it would do so. But nevertheless, these were the points of weakness in the existing structure, where any crisis would be felt most acutely. The Church was not in danger in 1500. But it was not invulnerable either.

Notes