

# Late Medieval Religion

## The Evidence from Material Culture

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One of the teachers at the Catholic school I attended in the early 1960s used to recall a conversation he had overheard years before in Gloucester Cathedral. Two tourists, one of them a Catholic priest, were very loudly deploring the wickedness of the Reformation. 'Just think', said the priest to his companion, waving his hand around at the glorious building, 'just think: all this was ours once'. This was the last straw for a verger who had been listening to their conversation with visibly mounting indignation. 'If you don't mind me saying so, sir', he burst out, 'it'd still be yours if you'd behaved yourselves properly'.

The verger's devastating repartee was more than an unanswerable put-down: it exactly summed up the conventional historical view of the state of the late medieval Church in England. The Reformation, on this view, was a desperately-needed clean-up operation, rendered absolutely necessary by the corruption and the failure of late medieval Christianity. The monasteries were peopled by lazy and lecherous monks, the parishes by greedy and ignorant parish clergy, while the laity were fed on superstitious legends, excluded from worship carried on in an alien language, gulled out of their money by the sale of indulgences, and oppressed by unscriptural teaching designed to frighten them out of their wits with the horrors of purgatory. As a result, the late medieval Church had exhausted its credit with its constituents, the laity. The more intelligent of them were growing impatient with the spiritual food provided by the Church, drawn to the anticlerical and anti-sacramental heresy of Lollardy, a religion of plain dealing and bible reading, and they were chafing at the demands of the church courts and the financial burden imposed by the clergy. So Professor A. G. Dickens, the leading English historian of the Reformation, whose work dominated the field for a generation or more, from the early 1960s until the late 1980s, saw everywhere in the late Middle Ages in England the signs of the Church's institutional decline – the

decay of monastic vocations, the drying up of the establishment of new chantries (funds, and often buildings, established in perpetuity to provide prayers and masses for the dead, and staffed by priests whose sole or main occupation was intercession for the dead). He thought that the dwindling of such institutions on the eve of the Reformation was a sign that people were ceasing to believe in purgatory or the benefits of intercessory prayer for the dead. Thus the Reformation, when it came, fell on welcoming ears, for it was the breaking in of light and air on a claustrophobic and intellectually exhausted and discredited institution.

Behind all this, of course, was a vast raft of unacknowledged ideological and religious assumptions which were devastatingly revealed in the opening words of the 1989 revision of Dickens' *The English Reformation*. 'In England as elsewhere', Dickens wrote, 'the protestant reformation sought first and foremost to reestablish Gospel Christianity, to maintain the authority of New Testament evidence over mere church tradition and human inventions masquerading as universally approved truths and unwritten verities'.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last twenty years most of these assumptions have been overturned or quietly abandoned. In part, this change has come from a 'revisionist' account of the Reformation which emphasised its slow and contested character. The evidence on which these newer perceptions have been based is very varied, and many historians have contributed to the shift in understanding, beginning perhaps rather unexpectedly with Sir Geoffrey Elton's magisterial study of the enforcement of the Henrician Reformation, *Policy and Police*,<sup>2</sup> with its heavy emphasis on the need for both repression and persuasion in winning hearts and minds away from medieval catholicism. Professor J. J. Scarisbrick, in *The Reformation and the English People*,<sup>3</sup> demonstrated the piece-meal and improvised nature of the Henrician Reformation, which was imposed and slowly accepted item by item, without anyone having much sense of the momentousness or finality of what was taking place. Dr. Ronald Hutton used churchwardens accounts from hundreds of Tudor parishes to trace the slow and partial character of the implementation of central policy in the localities, demonstrating both the extent of

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1. Dickens 1989, p. 1.

2. Elton 1972.

3. Scarisbrick 1984.

Tudor deference to the Crown and the evident lack of positive lay enthusiasm for the new religion.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Christopher Haigh in a series of important studies demonstrated the imperviousness of whole regions to protestant ideas and institutions, the role of conservative clergy and laity in frustrating the spread and establishment of protestantism, and challenged some of the conventional assumptions about the unpopularity of the clergy on the eve of the Reformation.<sup>5</sup>

All these studies observed late medieval Christianity primarily in relation to the religious revolutions which swept through Tudor England. But there has also been a reappraisal of late medieval religion in its own terms, regardless of its fate at the hands of reformers. A series of regional studies have explored the working of late medieval religion in cities like London, Bristol and Norwich,<sup>6</sup> and in the regions more generally.<sup>7</sup> National studies of the evolution and working of the parish and its institutions<sup>8</sup> and a series of regionally based studies of late medieval guilds<sup>9</sup> have all mapped the variety, adaptability and popularity of late medieval English Christianity which was one of the main contentions of my own *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-c. 1580* from 1992.<sup>10</sup>

### The evidence of the material culture

This reappraisal would have been unimaginable without the opening up to researchers of the exceptionally rich local archives of late medieval and early Tudor England. But even before historians began seriously to investigate the wills, churchwardens accounts

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4. Hutton 1987.

5. His findings are summarised in Haigh 1993.

6. For Bristol, a series of studies by Clive Burgess: Burgess 1985, 1987(a) and 1987(b); for Norwich, Tanner 1974; for London, Barron 1985 and Burgess 2002.

7. For the diocese of Salisbury, Brown 1995; for Suffolk, Stewart 2001; for Somerset, French 2001.

8. Especially Kümin 1996; Wright, ed. 1988; and French, Gibbs and Kümin, eds. 1997.

9. Most notably Bainbridge 1996 and Farnhill 2001.

10. A representative overview of the newer assessment of late medieval Christianity in England can be found in Harper-Bill 1996.



and guild records on which the new perceptions have been largely based, the vitality of the late medieval Church was manifest to anyone who took seriously the surviving evidence of the material culture of late medieval Christianity. This was a distinctive type of evidence, previously almost totally neglected, yet which has greatly contributed to the questioning of earlier negative views of late medieval religion.

England is almost unique among countries in which the Reformation took a 'reformed' or Calvinist form, in preserving a huge body of surviving late medieval and religious artifacts – thousands of medieval church building which not only encode within their structures a good deal of information about religious practice on the eve of the Reformation, but which contain an astonishing richness and variety of medieval religious artifacts – pictures, stained-glass, carving, sacred vessels – from the last two centuries of the Middle Ages. Moreover, these objects are often astonishingly well-documented. England, once again almost uniquely, preserves hundreds of late medieval and early Tudor churchwardens accounts, and tens of thousands of wills: in them we can see the religious attitudes and beliefs which shaped and furnished the parish churches of the late Middle Ages; by attending to them we can penetrate a little further than before into the religious world of ordinary men and women.<sup>11</sup>

The century before the Reformation was one of massive investment by lay people in church building, most obvious in the great wool churches of East Anglia or the West country, but everywhere that growing prosperity gave lay people money to spare and a desire to bestow it in pious provision – and display. Whole new churches were created, like the magnificent church funded by the local landowners and masterminded by Anne Boleyn's great grandfather Godfrey Boleyn at Salle in Norfolk.<sup>12</sup> Other churches were not built anew from the ground, as Salle was, but were added to or extended: many late medieval churches, for example, were given a new porch, in which the opening ceremonies of baptism were performed, and

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11. Marks and Williamson, eds. 2003.

12. Much of the surviving documentation on medieval Salle is gathered or summarised in Parsons 1937; there are brief architectural accounts by T. A. Heslop in Ford, ed. 1988, pp. 194-9; Fawcett and King 1980; Blomefield and Parkin 1769, vol. IV, pp. 421-6.



which provided the setting for that essential sacrament of the laity, matrimony. The sacramental part of the marriage ceremony in late medieval England took place not at the altar, but outside, at the church door. That accounts for the creation at Tiverton in 1525 of a splendid new church porch as part of the chantry chapel complex added to the south side of Tiverton parish church by John Greneway, the wealthiest man in central Devon, whose fleet of wool-ships sail proudly round the pediment of the building in which his priest was to sing for the repose of his soul till the world's end. Inside the porch, Greneway and his wife Joan had themselves portrayed as devout catholics, kneeling at their prayer-stools, their books of hours open before them in adoration of the Virgin assumed into heaven. Whatever Greneway's motives – a mixture no doubt of flashy display of wealth and real concern for his soul – this wealthy and powerful couple choose to portray themselves, at vast expense, as devout catholics, investing in the doctrine of purgatory, and appealing to the intercession of the Virgin.<sup>13</sup>

That pious self-portrayal is to be found everywhere in the religious benefactions of the laity in late medieval England. It is in evidence in the Withipole altarpiece, commissioned by the leading London and Bristol merchant Paul Withypole from the Venetian painter Antonio de Solario, in which the donor kneels devoutly before the holy family, invoking the saving power of Christ and the prayers of Mary.<sup>14</sup> Much more humbly, it is in evidence in the Bacon family, reciting the Rosary together on the screen put up sometime after 1512 in the small Norfolk parish of Fritton. The Bacons too, are praying to the saints, but these saints have a special significance: they are the four Latin Doctors – Saints Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory, and in late medieval England they stood for the teaching authority, the *magisterium* of the Church. Donors who had themselves painted in supplication to these saints – as John and Hilary Baymend also did at Foxley in Norfolk in the reign of Henry VII – are doing more than display devotion to the saints. They are explicitly depicting themselves as obedient to the Church's teaching.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Welsford 1984.

14. The picture is currently in the Bristol city Art Gallery; it is illustrated in Marks and Williamson, eds. 2003, p. 275.

15. Reproduced in Duffy 1992, figs. 124-5.

The self-portrayal of Tudor people in their tomb-brasses as devout catholics is routine enough for its startling significance to have been missed by historians. In the famous and exquisite Pownder Brass, from the later 1525, a wealthy Ipswich merchant and his family display their rosaries and ask in English for prayers for their souls. Yet these merchants are precisely the sort of people to whom, on the older account, the Reformation was thought to have appealed most: it was these wealthy, educated and powerful men and women who are supposed to have been disillusioned with the old religion, thirsting for the refreshment of the Protestant gospel. Yet in early Tudor England these very people were investing lavishly in the material forms of medieval religion, with no apparent inkling that it was about to be swept away. Thus, in the early 1520s, Thomas Spring III, newly armigerous and anxious to mark his social arrival, built a chantry chapel in Lavenham parish church, and installed a priest to celebrate mass and pray there: his arms occurs more than thirty times in the decoration of the church. That Spring's endowed masses were valued by the parish is witnessed to by the elevation squints crudely cut elegant new panelling, so that those kneeling outside could see the host by Spring's priest.<sup>16</sup>

Lavenham was a particularly wealthy community, but in most parish churches the nave, the people's part of the church which the laity paid for, maintained, and controlled, would have had several nave altars served by priests paid for – and therefore hired and fired by lay people. These altars were not all chantry-foundations. There were fewer perpetual chantries being founded anyway, since they had always been the prerogative of the very wealthy, and in any case the late medieval laity had come to prefer short-term to perpetual foundations. It was common in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries for prosperous people to hire a priest for a fixed term – one, five or seven years – and these priests said their masses at existing altars. The vessels, vestments and books provided for such temporary chantries might return to the possession of the donor's family when the chantry expired, or pass to the use of the parish, as a secondary benefaction. It is important to grasp that these priests were more than mere massing machines. Many ran schools, or acted as administrators and scribes for the com-

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16. Duffy 1992, figs. 52 and 53. The Pownder Brass is reproduced in Marks and Williamson, eds. 2003, p. 444.

munity. They were often local men – the font at Salle is inscribed with a Latin legend explaining that it is the gift of one of the fifteenth-century chantry priests of the church and of his parents, who were local people. At any one time there were up to half a dozen priests serving the guild and chantry altars of Salle, and we have the names of more than thirty of the clergy for the century or so before the Reformation. Many of them came from local families, and were well integrated into the local community, respected and valued members of it, not resented aliens. The obit or funeral liturgies celebrated at these altars were also a social as well as a religious asset, for they provided not only daily masses, but on the anniversaries of the benefactors doles to the poor. Communities valued the presence of these priests, who often acted and were expected to act as assistant clergy at the main parish liturgies, who provided musical resources (an ability to sing both plainsong and polyphony was sometimes stated as a requirement for chantry-clergy) and who helped the parish priest hear confessions in the busy season of Lent. The common presence of a chaplain as witness to fifteenth and early sixteenth-century wills suggests that they also shared in the ministry to the dying.

### **Social context and religious meaning**

A sense of the social context and religious meaning of this material culture can be gained by attending to the religious benefactions of a single fifteenth century donor to her city parish. Between the death of her husband Henry in 1470, and her own in December 1485, the wealthy Bristol widow Alice Chester showered a series of major benefactions on her parish church of All Saints, in the heart of the city. She continued and extended the chantry established by her husband ‘for the loving of almighty God and the augmenting of divine service’. This chantry provided the parish with the services of an auxiliary priest, who conducted masses and prayers of intercession for Alice Chester’s family every Friday in the year and on the anniversary of Henry’s death. She paid for the installation of a riverside crane for loading and unloading merchandise by the Marsh Gate, a crucial amenity in this city devoted to maritime trade. Above all, she funded an extensive programme of renewal of the church’s liturgical furnishings and devotional imagery. She



commissioned a statue of the Trinity ‘over the image of Jesus’, standing in a gilded tabernacle covered with a curtain which could be closed or drawn back ‘when it shall please the vicar and the parishioners’. She gilded the Lady Altar, paid for a painted frontal, and commissioned a carved tabernacle with three of the most popular late medieval representations of Mary – the Pieta, the Annunciation, and the Assumption. She had the rood altar gilded and carved with images of the saints – St Anne, St Mary Magdalene, St Giles, St Erasmus, St Anthony, and she provided another painted veil to cover these images ‘at certain times’. She presented a long linen towel or ‘houselling-cloth’ to be held under the chins of her fellow-parishioners as they knelt in rows to receive their annual communion on Easter day. She gave a great brass basin for the ritual washing of the church’s relics on Relic Sunday, and a new cross of enamel and silver gilt to be carried in the weekly processions before the main Sunday mass. And ‘taking to her counsel the worshipful of this parish with others having best insights in carving, to the honour and worship of almighty God and his saints, and of her special devotion unto this church’, she commissioned a new roodloft, the great partition separating the chancel and high altar from the body of the church, filled with twenty-two carved and gilded images, arranged in pairs on pillars and tabernacles round the principal image of the Trinity, which was flanked by statues of St Christopher and St Michael the Archangel. Finally, considering that ‘there was no hearse cloth in the church of any reputation in value ... for the love and honour she had unto almighty God and all Christian souls, and for the ease and succour of all this parish unto whom she owed her good will and love in her day’, she presented the church with a black pall, decorated with her own and her husband’s initials and an inscription in latin asking for prayers for their souls, for use at the funerals of other parishioners.<sup>17</sup>

Mistress Chester’s bounty epitomises many of the preoccupations at the heart of late medieval lay piety. It was a Christianity rooted in the concrete, nourished by the sight of images and the touch of relics and of ‘sacramentals’ (sacred objects and ceremonies) like holy-water, focussed on the passion of Christ and the intercession of the saints, above all the Virgin Mary, but also practical helper saints like Christopher, protector of travellers, Michael, protector of the

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17. Details of these gifts in Burgess, ed. 1995, pp. 15-7.

death-bed, or Erasmus, protector against disorders of stomach and bowels(!). It was a piety much concerned with death, with the power of prayers and pious works to ease the souls of the departed through the cleansing pains of purgatory, and with the mutual obligations of prayer and charity which bound the living to the dead. It was a ritual piety, intensely reverential towards the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, it was keyed to the annual cycle of the liturgy, processions and masses, the feasts of the saints and their relics, and the Church's seasons – Lent, when the many images in the church were concealed behind veils painted with tokens of the Passion, and Easter, when the community celebrated and consolidated its often fragile unity by reconciling quarrels and kneeling shoulder to shoulder to receive communion together. It was a Christianity which coloured, and was coloured by, the structures and values of society, emphasising the virtues of neighbourhood and hence attributing religious merit to practical benefactions like the riverside crane, acutely conscious of rank and precedence, endearingly and competitively sensitive to appearances and respectability. Planning her munificence, Mistress Chester consulted the vicar and the leading parishioners, the 'worshipful' of the parish. The element of pride of wealth and conspicuous consumption in her giving is crystallised in the gift of the hearse cloth or pall prominently embroidered with her own and her husband's initials. Those embroidered names must have had the effect of annexing every funeral at which the cloth was used, thereby exacting repayment in the form of the perpetual reciprocity of the parish's prayers. Through Mistress Chester's benefactions we catch a vivid glimpse of the social dynamics of an urban community, in which skilled and articulate craftsmen expected even lavish benefactors to observe the courtesies of consultation and group decision-making. These were communities used to transacting business, dealing with the demands of ecclesiastical and secular authorities, electing their own churchwardens and guild officers, managing their own funds, mounting their own ambitious schemes of decoration and rebuilding. We glimpse too the physical layout of a prosperous late medieval church, crammed with altars and images and lights, the theatre for a liturgy which sanctified matter by blessing and venerating it, which sanctified space by processing around it or dividing it into holy corrals with decorated screens and partitions, and which sanctified time in the cycle of fast and feast, penitence and celebration, that made up the ritual year.



All this suggests a high degree of comprehension of the symbolic world which lay people inhabited, and attests the resolutely public and social character of fifteenth-century Christianity, nowhere more in evidence than in the luxuriance of the cult of Corpus Christi. The feast of Corpus Christi was introduced into England in 1318; by the 1390s it had become universal, and its texts and observances were a target for Lollard polemic – the Twelve Conclusions of 1395 denounced ‘the service of Corpus Christi made by friar Thomas (Aquinas) ... untrue and painted full of false miracles’.<sup>18</sup> Corpus Christi indeed became a touchstone of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, and the reformed Lollard Philip Repingdon rigorously enforced its observance in his diocese. But in fifteenth century England enforcement was hardly necessary. The feast’s central theme of community in and around the sacramental body of Christ made it an ideal vehicle for the proclamation of communal values and social hierarchy, and elaborate Corpus Christi processions, in which civic officials and craft guilds took their place became a feature of the feast in many towns. By the 1380s the city of York had added to the liturgical procession an elaborate processional cycle of plays, responsibility for which was devolved to the city guilds, and precedence within which became an important element in jockeying for power and influence within the community, ritual not so much a mirror of the community as an arena in which the strains as well as the bonds of community could be displayed and negotiated. Cooperation with the city’s celebration of the feast became a mark of good citizenship: thus York householders were required to hang their best hangings or bedsteads out of their windows to beautify the processional route.<sup>19</sup> The same union of citizenship and religious observance is visible everywhere in fifteenth century England. The Corpus Christi procession at Bristol was a ‘religious’ not a ‘civic’ occasion, the mayor and corporation leaving its organisation to the city clergy and religious houses, but the mayor and corporation processed in full robes to the city churches on the other major summer liturgical feasts of the year like Easter and Whitsun, and on many saints’ days. The most distinguished Bristol mayor of the century, William Canynges, became a cleric himself in the last weeks of his final term of office as mayor, and for the last

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18. Hudson 1978, pp. 24-9.

19. Johnston 1976.



six years of his life played as large a role in the city and diocese's religious life as he had in the city's secular affairs. His effigy, robed as a canon, was placed as a memorial in Westbury Collegiate church, where he was dean, but he was buried alongside his wife in St Mary Redcliffe, robed in secular dress as mayor, a one-man embodiment of the interweaving of religious and civic life in late medieval England.<sup>20</sup>

### **Lay religious understanding and religious orthodoxy**

The Eucharist and its attendant public observances offer us a way into the difficult question of lay religious understanding and religious orthodoxy. It is tempting to assume a gulf between public observance and internal conviction, and difficult in any case to gain access to lay religious opinion. The Mass, however, was no mere symbol of power and hierarchy, and if we seldom encounter non-formulaic lay confessions of eucharistic faith, there is plenty of evidence from lay manipulation of the symbolic language of the eucharist to suggest that it was widely understood and valued. The communal dimensions of the Mass could readily be deployed in defence of popular community values in the face of overbearing authority, and also as a means of creating or repairing social bonds from below, in an exercise of what John Bossy has called the 'social miracle'. Two examples of lay manipulation of the symbolism surrounding the distribution of the 'Holy Loaf' on Sundays will illustrate this aspect of the social character of late medieval Christianity. The Holy Loaf was a loaf of ordinary bread ceremonially presented to the priest each week before the main parish mass by a householder – there was a rota to determine whose responsibility this was. The bread was then blessed by the recitation of the opening verses of St John's Gospel over it. At the end of Mass it was cut up, and the pieces were distributed to the congregation as a communion substitute, and as a symbol of the unity and blessing which flowed from the Mass. In some communities the pieces were carefully graded by size, and the larger pieces went to the parishioners of greatest consequence. As was the case with another peace ritual, the kissing of the paxbrede after the priest's communion,

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20. Sherborne n.d.

disputes over precedence and order during this ritual were common, a mark of its key role in determining due order and precedence within the community.

The Peasants Revolt of 1381 had eucharistic resonances. It broke out, surely by prearrangement, on the feast of Corpus Christi, June 13th 1381, and historians have recently become intrigued by the interplay between the social dimensions of that feast and the social breakdown expressed in the Rising.<sup>21</sup> The Revolt is particularly well-documented at St Albans, where the Chronicler Thomas Walsingham was an eye-witness. The grievances of the Commons at St Albans were varied, but one important issue was the Abbey's much resented monopoly on the milling of flour. An earlier abbot had succeeded in forcing the local tenantry to surrender their millstones, and in token of the Abbey's control over milling, had set the confiscated millstones into the floor of the monastery parlour. During the rebellion, therefore, a mob armed with the implements of their trades broke into the Abbey, marched to the parlour and dug the stones out of the floor. They proceeded to break the stones up, and distributed a piece each to the men present to take home. The chronicler was much struck by their action, and recognised it as a deliberate reference to the Holy Loaf ritual. The Commons took the stone particles home, he declared, that 'seeing the pieces, they might remember that they had once triumphed in this dispute with the monastery'. He went on to lament the damage to the monastery in a cluster of phrases from the Psalms which rang the changes on eucharistic images of bread, corn and sheaves.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most striking features of this incident is the extraordinary and assured power of the St Alban's Commons' deployment of a familiar para-eucharistic ritual to express their sense of injustice and its setting to rights. The sensitivity to social order and decorum which normally characterised Holy Bread rituals was here heightened to reflect an ideal just ordering of society. In it the fragment of stone became what the Corpus Christi antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* calls the consecrated particles of the Eucharist, a *pignus*, a token, sign and downpayment of a hoped-for reality, at once a reminder of liberation achieved and a standing testimony to the power of that victory in the present and the future. For the Com-

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21. For example, Aston 1994.

22. Riley, ed. 1869, pp. 308-9.

mons of St Albans in 1381 the victory and justice celebrated in the Mass was in some sense reflected in their protest against the oppression of the Abbey which put an unjust price on their daily bread.

My second example is derived from an account of the resolution of disputes in the small Bristol city church of St Ewen's in the early 1460s. The church of St Ewen derived much of its income from the rent of shops and tenements in the town centre, and the church wardens were locked in an expensive and long-drawn-out dispute with one wealthy parishioner, the corn-merchant John Sharp, over the rental of one of these properties. It was finally resolved in January 1464, and in token of restored charity Sharp changed his will, to include a handsome donation to parish funds, in return for which he, his wife Elizabeth, and deceased members of their family were entered in the church's bede-roll to be prayed for publicly as benefactors. On the following Sunday, as it happened, it was the turn of the Sharps to provide the loaf to be used in the Holy Bread ritual. There was a prescribed ritual for presenting this bread, which happened before Matins and Mass began. On the Sunday in question Elizabeth Sharp turned up in pomp, accompanied by a maid who carried the bread and the candle which was offered with it, and also a long embroidered linen towel. This was a 'houselling towel', the long cloth held under the chins of parishioners when they made their annual Easter communion, to prevent crumbs of the eucharistic host falling to the ground. Having duly presented the loaf, Mistress Sharp summoned the parson and the chief parishioners. She expressed her great joy at the restoration of unity and charity within the parish and between her family and the rest of the community, and she donated the towel as a sign of that unity. Up till now, the parish, which did not own a single long towel, had improvised by pinning three short towels together. The unity of the new towel symbolised that the peace which had just been concluded was no patched up affair, but a seamless whole, and the towel was to be used on the one day in the year when the whole parish celebrated and cemented its unity by receiving communion together. There are a lot of subtexts here, and Mistress Sharp's gift was clearly designed in part to recover a lost authority in the community: she stipulated that till her death the towel was to remain in her keeping, and would be fetched at eastertime by the parish clerk: holding on to the towel, she sought to exercise power in the community. But however that may be, once again, there is no mis-



taking the assured lay deployment of a eucharistic symbol and its accompanying language of unity and charity.<sup>23</sup>

The furnishings and iconography of late medieval church buildings therefore witness not merely to massive lay investment in objects designed to express and teach the Church's teaching, but to a sophisticated and engaged comprehension of that teaching. The Seven Sacrament windows of the West Country, most famously that at Doddiscombsleigh, are a prime example of a sophisticated theology vividly conveyed in pictures, as streams of blood flow from the wounds of Christ to give the sacraments their power. In the same way in East Anglia the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century saw the creation of a new type of font – octagonal, with the seven sacraments, portrayed with scrupulous theological correctness depicted on seven of the eight sides.<sup>24</sup>

These were benefactions by lay people for lay people: clerical advice was no doubt involved in the choice and execution of such religious patronage, but it was paid for by hard-headed lay-people who knew what they wanted. Nor was such benefaction confined to the very wealthy like Thomas Spring or John Greneway. Many of the most impressive religious art-works of the late Middle Ages in England were corporate commissions, paid for by the united efforts of parishioners contributing to an ongoing project or pooling their resources in a single large-scale object. At Ludham in the 1490s the magnificent carved and painted screen, covered with saints, was inscribed for the main benefactor, John Salmon who, the inscription brashly tells us 'gave fourteen pound'. But we know that the screen was also paid for by many smaller gifts, some of just a few shillings. At Cawston the saints were added in groups or one by one as the money came in from local farmers: the four panels on the north side of the screen were paid for by William Athereth, who had an inscription in English recording the fact put underneath. Moreover, the decision to install such paintings had to be agreed by the parish, and we have a few contemporary accounts of the process of consultation between benefactors, clergy, and the 'honest' people of the parish: they usually involved a corporate decision taken at the parish meeting of all the householders. We can be sure, therefore, that these objects do indeed represent the

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23. Both incidents are discussed more fully in Duffy 1996.

24. Both types of representation are explored in Nichols 1994.

religious choice of the laity, and they were anxious to have their involvement in and gifts to the communal religious life of the community recorded.<sup>25</sup>

The indications are, therefore that in most parishes throughout the land people understood and valued the symbolic world of late medieval Catholicism, and that they were investing in it in a very concrete way up to the moment of Reformation. This situation was not changed, as is sometimes claimed, by the advent of print. By and large English publishers, like Wynkyn de Worde or Richard Pynson, were unenterprising; they played to a safe market and the books printed in and for England for two generations after the introduction of printing were overwhelmingly conservative and orthodox in character. That in itself of course tells us a great deal about the religious market and the tastes of the laity, but it does not mean that the quality of these religious books was poor, or that there was no innovation. Popular works like the *Kalendar of Shepherds* and the *Art or Craft to Live Well* contained high-quality catechetical and devotional material in English (much of it adapted from French originals) and by far the most popular books on the market were the Primers or Books of Hours, which sold in their thousands, some for a few pence, and which show a steady evolution to incorporate new pictorial styles, more English content, in general to respond to market demand. On the eve of the Reformation, therefore, the overwhelming majority of the population seem to have been committed to the Church.<sup>26</sup>

All this was of course conventional religion, but convention does not necessarily mean merely routine or external. We can get some sense of the continuing vitality of the symbolic world in which these people were investing by looking at part of the painted screen put up in the early 1530s, while the Reformation Parliament was in process of dismantling English links with Rome, in the tiny Norfolk parish of Wellingham. The screen was a joint enterprise, funded by donations from a group of local families. I want to draw attention to just two of the pictures painted on it.<sup>27</sup> The

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25. I have explored the relationship between private benefactions and public decision-taking in Duffy 1997.

26. On lay reading habits, see Bennett 1970, pp. 65-7, 69-71, 182-93; Duffy 1992, chapter 2. For a fascinating recent survey of women's reading which throws light on lay devotional taste in general, see Erler 2002.

27. Reproduced as fig. 50 in Duffy 1992 (between pp. 116-7).

first of these is the so-called 'Psychostasis' or judgement of souls. The Archangel Michael, charmingly portrayed sword in hand and wearing the feathered calf-length trousers which were the costume of actors playing angels in the religious plays of the period, treads down Satan, in the form of a dragon, while he weighs in a balance two naked human souls. In the other pan of the balance a wriggling mass of demons try to tip the judgement against the human souls. But behind the archangel, Mary, crowned and attended by an angel, approaches and lays a coral rosary on the scales. This scene, which occurs widely in late medieval painting, glass and carving, is a vivid and powerful image of the intercession of the Virgin at the moment of death. The second image is known as the Image of Pity. In it the dead Christ emerges from his tomb displaying his wounds and surrounded by the weapons which have caused them – the Instruments of the passion – scourge, nails, lance and so on. The image occupies only the upper part of the panel, for below it was a small nave altar at which was celebrated masses for the repose of the souls of the donors of the paintings. The Image of Pity is of course intended as a devotional evocation of the Passion – it occurs, for example, in block-prints which invite meditation on the scenes of the passion represented by the different images – the hand which slapped Christ in the face, the cock which crew when he was betrayed, and so on. But it is also a eucharistic image, associated with the so-called Mass of St Gregory, during which the wounded Christ appeared above the chalice and bled into it, thereby proclaiming the reality of the eucharistic presence. And the Mass of St Gregory was assimilated in late medieval piety to the so-called Trental of St Gregory, a series of thirty masses said for the repose of the souls of the dead which was believed to be especially powerful. For that reason, the Mass of St Gregory is found portrayed on tombs, like the Kirkham monument in Peignton in Devon, or on so-called 'Pardon brasses'. The image at Wellingham therefore encapsulates a whole cluster of late medieval religious beliefs – the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, devotion to the Passion, belief in the reality of purgatory and the power of the Mass to assist the souls in purgatory. Every Mass celebrated at the little altar in Wellingham became the Mass of St Gregory.



## Changes during the Reformation

English lay investment in the devotional world of Catholicism faltered as the Crown's hostility towards some aspects of that world became clear; but in many places it continued deep into the Reformation period. The screen at North Burlingham, eleven miles from Norwich, was completed only in 1536, its saints paid for by lay clients with the same names – St John and St Cecilia paid for by John and Cecily Blake, the picture of St Benedict and the rest of the north screen paid for by the Benet family. One of the principle donors was still alive when the screen was completed – the inscription asks for prayers for the good estate of Thomas Benet, not for the repose of his soul – and he paid for the figure nearest the chancel door, St Thomas Becket.<sup>28</sup> By the winter of 1538, however, Henry VIII had identified Becket as a symbol of the Church's freedom from Royal control, and he ordered the destruction of all images of the saint, and the removal of his name and his liturgy from the service books. At Burlingham they scraped the image away to the knees, but the rest of the saints were left untouched till Edward's reign, when they were all defaced, by a recognisably different hand. The same reluctant obedience is in evidence elsewhere. At Ranworth, in the Norfolk broads, they dutifully scraped the saint's name out of the calendar of the parish's great choir book, but instead of cutting St Thomas' service from the book, as they were required to do, they merely drew a thin line through it: in Mary's reign they would restore Thomas' name to the calendar, and once more sing his services.<sup>29</sup> At Ludham, the saints on the screen are mostly unharmed; but the papal tiara of Gregory the Great and the cardinal's hat of Jerome have been cut away – evidence not of protestant hostility to the saints, but of Henry's feud with the Pope.

The death of Henry VIII and the accession of his nine year old son, under the tutelage of a protestant Council, raised the stakes. The Reformation radicalised, and Edward was presented as the new Josiah, raised up by God to purge the worship of the new Isra-

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28. Reproduced as figs. 58 and 59 in Duffy 1992.

29. The calendar deletion of St Thomas' name in the Ranworth antiphoner is reproduced as fig. 136 in Duffy 1992.

el of England, and to burn the idols. A wave of religiously inspired devastation spread across England, carefully enforced by the civil and religious authorities. It was widely resented and sometimes frustrated, though in the end it achieved almost total compliance. The great rood screens, carrying the main image of Christ in the church, were a particular target. The crucifixes were removed and burned, the lower panelling and the tympanum which carried the Doom scenes were usually whitewashed and painted with scripture sentences – they survive at Binham, and at Wenhaston, while at Cawston the plaster of the chancel arch retains the impress of the great crucifix. At Foxley the people obeyed the royal command to saw down the upper part of their screen – but instead of burning it, they hid it and put it back in Mary’s reign.

The Crown enforced the rebuilding of at least two altars in every church, required each parish to have a statue of their patron saint and a great carved crucifix flanked by Mary and John, on which the figure of Christ was to be at least five feet high. The workshops could not cope with the demand, and some parishes, while they waited, made temporary provision of two-dimensional crucifixes, like the one which still survives at Ludham, painted on canvas stretched over the old tympanum. These images were required by law, but many parishes began voluntarily to restore the devotional imagery defrayed in the Edwardian holocaust. At Lessingham in Norfolk the early Tudor screen had carried pictures of the twelve apostles, scrubbed to ghosts under Edward. The parish repainted five of the panels (these probably represent donations by individuals, with a view to the whole screen eventually being covered). The choice of saints is striking – the four Latin Doctors, a symbol of restored obedience to the Catholic Church’s *magisterium*, and St Rocco, the plague saint. Plague swept through Norfolk in the mid 1550s, decimating the population: here is a vivid piece of evidence that in one village at least, despite the protestant years, they still believed that the saints could assist them. But the Marian interlude proved to be just that, a pause in the process of the Crown enforcement of reform.<sup>30</sup>

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30. Lessingham parish church is now closed, and the screen panels are kept in the Church Museum at St Peter Hungate in Norwich.

## Concluding remarks

With the accession in 1558 of Mary's protestant half-sister, the daughter of Anne Boleyn, the deconstruction of the symbolic world of Catholicism was resumed. Once again the parishes obeyed – at Ludham once more they stretched canvass across the tympanum, covering the Marian crucifix, and painted the Queen's arms on it.<sup>31</sup> In place of the Blessed Sacrament Elizabeth ordered the placing of boards painted with the Ten Commandments, to instruct the people and beautify the churches. Once more the scrapers, the hatchets and the whitewash brushes went to work, and the religion of England moved once again from image to word, from a culture of symbol to a culture dominated by speech. The pulpit displaced the altar. The transition is nicely captured in two funeral brasses in the south aisle of Cley parish church, one from the reign of Henry VIII, the other from the year of the Armada. The Symonds brass commemorates a Cley shipowner and merchant, John Symonds, and his wife Agnes, and dates from 1512 (when he died) or soon after. It depicts these wealthy parishioners naked and cadaverous in their shrouds, surrounded by their children and a series of scrolls which carry the legend 'now thus'. An English inscription asks for prayers – 'Of your charite pray for the souls of John Symonds, merchant, and Agnes his wyfe, the which John decessed the 14 day of Januare 1508 and the said Agnes decessed the last day of May 1512'.

Shroud brasses of this sort were becoming fashionable in the last years of Henry VII and the early years of Henry VIII: they present the wealthy person commemorated as a needy neighbour in need of help, and remind the onlooker that one day they too will be 'now thus'. There is another fifteenth-century Norfolk example at Salle, for John Briggs, which has a verse inscription which spells out the message of the imagery more explicitly:

Here lyeth John Brigge under this marble stone  
Whose sowle our Lord I H S have mercy upon  
For in this world worthily he lived many a day  
And here his body is buried and couched under clay.  
Lo friends fro whatever you be pray for me, I you pray  
As ye me see, in such degree so shall ye be another day.

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31. Reproduced as figs. 137-8 in Duffy 1992.



Five or six paces from the Symonds brass in the south aisle at Cley is another, much plainer memorial. It commemorates another wealthy Tudor citizen of Cley, Richard Ralph:

Here lyeth the body of Richard Ralph late of this Towne who in his lyfe was of honest and quyett behavior, frendly to the poore, and at his death gave dyvers legacyes aswell to this Towne as to others, whose godly example god graunt others may folowe. He deceased the fyrst of January 1588. From corruption to incorruption we shall all be changed.

Both these Cley memorials mark the graves of members of the local elite, both marshall concepts of corruption, mortality and salvation. But between the Symonds' brass, with its vivid pictorial evocation of the needy dead, and its direct vernacular supplication for the charitable prayers of the parish, on the one hand, and the purely textual evocation of Richard Ralph's godly example on the other, there stands a great watershed, and the passing of the symbolic world of late medieval religion.

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