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[Introduction to] Thinking of the Laity in Late Tudor England

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Thinking of the Laity

in Late Tudor England

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Introduction

How thoroughly reformed was the English laity during the second half of the sixteenth century? Did laymen enthusiastically accept, acquiesce, or resist? Historians have variously answered those questions for years. They sift churchwardens' accounts, visitation records, complaints filed with church courts, wills, ballads, and broadsheets, searching for Protestant commitment, religious indifference, and residual Catholicism. In what follows, we will have occasion to revisit some of their sources and draw on what has already been learned from them. But other, related, though far less frequently asked questions preoccupy us here: What were reformers thinking of the laity? How and why did their thinking change?

To most English Protestants in the 1560s, 1570s, and 1580s, Roman Catholicism was a religion "expound[ing] *ecclesia* to be a state opposite unto, and severed from the laietie."[1] To be sure, this complaint exaggerated Catholic clericalism and conveniently forgot about subparochial structures that encouraged lay initiative and lay leadership. *Thinking of the Laity* will do little to offset the exaggerations and forgetfulness with spirited discussions of late medieval laicism and clericalism, for this volume is a study of

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1. DWL, Morrice MSS. B.2, 235v, and C, 452. The critic (T.N.) was almost certainly Thomas Norton, the son-in-law of Henrician reformer and archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Norton offered his definition of *ecclesia* in 1583, twenty years after he translated John Calvin's *Institutes* into English. Thomas More, the recusant descendant of his famous namesake, all but substantiated Norton's charge, for when More was arrested in 1582, a confession of faith found among his papers claimed that *ecclesia* referred only to persons in holy orders. More's confession insisted that scripture only "semeth to call the whole churche" together for important decisions. Cambridge, Emmanuel College MS. 76, 9v–10r.

sixteenth-century perception and prejudice. It concentrates on reformers who saw or imagined a "sever[ing] from the laietie" and sought to remedy it. The more impatient among them are known now as puritans, the most "forward" of whom favored an extraordinarily controversial remedy: broadly participatory parish regimes. They commended lay involvement in parish elections and suggested greater lay say in disciplining delinquents. Their critics perceived participatory solutions or initiatives as problems and opposed experiments with laicization, democratization, and local control. And by 1590, the critics prevailed. John Whitgift, Richard Cosin, John Aylmer, Matthew Sutcliffe, and Richard Bancroft made sure that few contemporaries thought of the laity as favorably as had the likes of Robert Browne, William Fulke, John Field, Thomas Lever, Dudley Fenner, and John Udall. Their story is one of false starts and foolhardy sentiments, and it sprawls across our last two chapters. At the end, though, we find that the advocates themselves had second thoughts and had grown skeptical and suspicious of lay and local control.

That advocates were dissuaded (as were other reformers who were more ambivalent from the start, notably, John Jewel, Edwin Sandys, Thomas Cartwright, and Walter Mildmay) accounts, in part, for the general neglect of the tale we tell. For historians are usually more intrigued by what was than by what might have been. "What was," in this instance, is an Elizabethan puritanism that has been expertly repossessed and redeposited in the mainstream of English Protestantism by Patrick Collinson, Nicholas Tyacke, and others. "What might have been" would likely have resembled later congregationalism. This work features fresh evidence that Elizabethan partisans of broadly participatory parish regimes publicly confronted their critics, and it collects shards of expectations and regrets that survive in a few petitions, in manuscript records of university controversy, in recollections volunteered by advocates of lay and local control, and in the exaggerated fears of their adversaries. To assemble these fragments is to find forgotten moments in the Elizabethan polity debates and to recover thinking about the laity that gave "revolutionary force" to late Tudor puritanism, a force that, Tyacke admits, has gone missing. And, as we discover why, by whom, and to what end, plans were made to pass along power to the people, we are reminded that roads not taken are as yet important parts of the historical landscape.[2]

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2. Nicholas Tyacke, "The Rise of Puritanism," in *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England,* ed. Ole Peter Grell, Jonathan I. Israel, et al.

But who were "the people" puritan partisans of lay and local control expected to participate influentially in parish deliberations, debate doctrine, and elect pastors? And precisely who were the puritans who assumed some degree of democratization was consistent with and instrumental to religious reform? Chapter 1, "Coming to Terms," arrives at answers while proposing definitions.

That chapter begins toward the end of the sixteenth century, when the popular preacher William Perkins created Eusebius, an uncommonly articulate commoner who dramatizes how the reformers' convictions countenanced lay assertiveness. Let Eusebius be a lesson, Perkins seems to say, a demonstration that ordinary people can internalize the reformation's good news about the gratuity of God's grace, can discipline themselves—although they tend to misbehave—and can usefully preach grace and discipline to others. Yet the story concludes ambiguously. Eusebius is both independent and deferential. Might Perkins somehow have been commending both social control and religious individualism? He was a particular favorite among puritans, many of whom reportedly partnered with eminent parishioners to keep the commoners down and out. Other puritans, connoisseurs of spiritual conflict, did not gravitate to the aristocracy's side in social conflicts. They, too, would have admired Perkins' Eusebius, an emblematic commoner or Protestant Everyman, avidly involved in the "perennial struggle of the godly for assurance of their elect status." Involvement in that struggle, puritan populists suggested, prepared the laity to participate as well and as responsibly in deliberations prevenient to critical congregational decisions.[3]

Partisans of participatory parish regimes allowed that lay participants could be drawn from a vast cast of characters beneath the gentry and above the chronically indigent. For centuries, people of that "caste" were known

(Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 17–18. Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society, 1559–1625* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 275–76, comments on the "containment" of radical elements, as he does in his "English Conventicle," in *Voluntary Religion*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diane Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 249–51.

3. Peter Lake, "Defining Puritanism Again," in *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Faith*, ed. Francis Bremer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 3–29, identifies puritanism as "a style of piety" responsible for various degrees of opposition to reformed religious settlements depending on the strength of the puritans' "impulse toward incorporation." For the place of "perennial inner struggle" in that "style of piety," see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 19–20.

as *"mediocres"*; during the sixteenth, they were called "the middling sort." We refer to the puritans proposing to give them a greater part in parish government as "populists," but with a crucial proviso or stipulation, because puritans did not claim to express the will of the people as did the populists of later periods. Quite the contrary, puritan pastors generally mistrusted their parishioners and urged them to repent much of what they willed. Yet "forward" puritans also exhibited a populist's faith in the virtues and common sense of the godly commoner. Hence, "Coming to Terms," settles for an anachronism to underscore "the revolutionary force" of proposals that died in infancy when suspicions about the commoners' competence could neither be allayed nor answered convincingly.

Elizabethan puritans were not the first sixteenth-century English reformers to suggest that parishioners pick their pastors. The second chapter surveys a stretch from later lollardy through Marian Protestantism, pausing first for William Tyndale, who argued that select laymen were "as wise as officers" of the church.[4] He predicted that when the wisest of laymen, his king, Henry VIII, reformed the realm's religion, commoners would ensure that churches not return to that sad state to which "the practice of prelates" had consigned them, namely, to the corrupt patronage practices of Catholics.

Thomas Cranmer, the king's archbishop of Canterbury, was more restrained while Henry lived, though he openly opposed the clericalism of conservative Henricians. Later, he welcomed many reformed refugees from the continent, permitting them their experiments with participatory parish practices. They apparently took his permission as an enthusiastic endorsement and inferred that the polity and discipline of all the realm's churches would soon resemble theirs. Yet Cranmer was cautious, even after 1547, with the inconstant Henry in his grave. Ardent and more constant reformers were influentially positioned in the new king's court, but Cranmer imagined that laymen long loyal to Catholicism were still under its spell despite the decade and more of reform. The laity, therefore, was unprepared to accept and usefully exercise authority. And it would likely remain so, he suspected, until he and the likes of Hugh Latimer had more time to train clergy and commoners alike.

But there was too little time. Young King Edward VI died in the summer of 1553, before Cranmer's reformed preachers and theologians, imported from abroad, could make over the middling sort and before he could

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4. William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Parts of the Holy Scriptures,* ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 236–41.

implement modest changes in polity and procedure that might have promoted greater lay participation in parish administration. On Edward's death, his half-sister and successor, Mary I, overcame opposition to rule and re-catholicized her realm. Inadvertently, though, her measures to suppress Protestantism encouraged lay leadership. In England commoners stepped forward to preach and protest when their reformed pastors were arrested. And nothing showed lay initiative to advantage better than the conditions of exile.

The exiles returned on receiving news of Mary's death in 1558. They expected their new queen, Elizabeth I, to favor reform but found she favored, above all, "obedyent subjects" and assumed hierarchy was "necessarie for [the] preservation of obedience and order among the clergy." Probably neither queen nor council gave much thought to lay participation in the parishes. Instead, the regime was more concerned with the strictly political choices that their "giddy" commoners might make.[5]

Churchwardens, other commoners, and local priests, however, did give considerable thought to lay participation in decisions affecting parish policy and personnel. Into the 1560s commoners continued to serve as aldermen and on juries; they collected revenue for their churches and supervised expenditures. On occasion, they joined with fellow parishioners to choose their ministers. Partisans of such practices had precedents aplenty. Returning refugee and foremost apologist for the new religious settlement, John Jewel stressed the laity's competence and seemed to contemplate a degree of democratization, even after he became one of the queen's new bishops. But reservations about the realm's "rude and rash people" kept him from proposing or endorsing what more radical reformers found to be the polity implications of increased lay literacy and of the priesthood of all believers.[6]

In the early 1570s the radicals lobbied parliament for participatory parish regimes and took their case to the public. They argued that "thrusting" pastors on parishes without counsel or consent of the parishioners "cause[d] many mischeefes." Could churches be instruments of saving grace when prevailing patronage practices corrupted the ministry or emptied pulpits of preachers? Proponents of lay authority and local control said that "examples of all the apostles in all the churches and in all purer times" proved their

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5. I. B. Cauthen, ed. *Gorboduc, or Ferrex and Porrex* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 61: "so giddy are the common people's minds" (1562). For "obedyent subjects," see LPL MS. 2002, 61r (1559).

6. *Jewel,* 2:687–88.

point. Critics countered that it was irresponsible to subject pastors or policy to parishioners' whim. Laymen were to be led, not looked to for leadership.[7]

Just then, diocesan and government authorities limited lay assertiveness elsewhere. They commanded that "the people shulde be excludett" from prophecies, discussions of reformed doctrine and discipline that ordinarily followed a series of market-day sermons. The public face or phase of such "exercises" was suppressed from 1576, in large part, because, as one onlooker reported, prophesying tempted "every artificer" to become a "reformer and teacher."[8]

Dudley Fenner, curate in Kent, mourned the passing of prophesying and urged superiors to grant the laity greater say, albeit not "sway," in parish affairs. But by the 1580s diocesan officials were disinclined to give ground. They were on guard against "the multitude" or mob and even suspicious of requests to restrict pluralism in the parishes, requests which struck them as the thin edge of a menacing wedge, specifically, as a puritan "introduction to bringe patronage to the people."[9]

But puritans, too, grew skeptical that the proles could be preached to piety and trusted with power. Enthusiasm for lay and local control waned. Fenner retained more confidence in lay discretion than most—and Robert Browne, more still—yet the critics of participatory parish regimes were relentless. They vilified dissidents who dared favor them until only a very rare renegade suggested in print that a sound ministry might well depend on an enlightened and empowered laity. During the 1580s the puritans increasingly looked to personal piety rather than to a presbyterian or more broadly participatory polity for assurance that the realm's reform was genuine and lasting. *Thinking of the Laity* goes no further because it seemed more important to nearly all our protagonists late in that decade to be moved to repentance by one's pastor than to possess the power to remove him. William Fulke as much as conceded that populist puritanism had gotten nowhere, that the victories worth celebrating were not institutional but personal, with God "confirming and lightning oure minde inwardly."[10]

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7. Bodl., Selden Supra MS. 44, 32r; *Whitgift*, 3:296–300; and BL, Cotton Titus VI, 21v.

8. DWL, Morrice MSS. B.2.8, C.218, for "every artificer"; BL, Lansdowne MS. 23, 7r, 20r, for "excludett."

9. BL, Lansdowne MS. 30B, 203v–4r; Bodl., Ashmole MS. 383, 70r and 81v; and Dudley Fenner, *Counter-poysen* (London, 1584), 149.

10. William Fulke, *The Text of the New Testament* (London, 1598), C6v and 132v–33r.