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Key Issues: Religious Belief

Mike Rodman Jones

To place the terms 'religious belief' and 'popular culture' together in the early modern period is to court controversy. Few other areas of study have been so consistently marked by sharply ideological agendas, from the sixteenth century itself to the twentieth and beyond. This chapter will trace the historiography of religious belief from its earliest incarnations through the controversies and perspectives that developed over the course of the later twentieth century, and finally offer some observations and suggestions for current and future research in the area.¹

Historiography (I): Popular Reform?

Changing popular beliefs was one of the central tenets of the early Reformations in England, notably because many of the central documents of the period are historiographically orientated. Tyndale's biblical translations were supported by a sequence of polemical works that argued that the people of Christendom had been habitually duped and deceived by the clergy for hundreds of years.² Similarly, *The Book of Common Prayer* (first edition 1549, with numerous later amended editions) founded its own reform of devotional practice on the grounds that the 'Godly and decent ordre of the auncient fathers, hath been so altered, broken, and neglected' over the preceding centuries.³ The rhetorical (if nothing else) battle for the beliefs of the population of England, however, often assumed that the 'multitude' and their beliefs were actually almost unknowable: curiously positioned between the (supposedly) deceptive machinations of Roman Catholic institutions and the isolated minority of the 'godly' who liked to think of themselves fighting for their souls. In an exemplary case, the early reformer and ex-Carmelite John Bale figured 'The People' (or sometimes 'turba vulgaris') as a separate dramatic character in plays such as *King Johan* (c. 1536) always – like Everyman – wavering between straight and

¹ This essay is much indebted to excellent earlier work detailing the historiography of the English Reformations, in particular, Peter Marshall and Alec Ryrie, *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Alec Ryrie, ed., *Palgrave Advances in the European Reformations* (London: Palgrave, 2005), and Peter Marshall, '(Re)defining the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 564-586.

² See, for example, the passages in G. E. Duffield, ed. *The Work of William Tyndale* (London: Sutton Courtney Press, 1964), pp. 31-2.

³ Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 5.

crooked paths under the influence of other figures. 'Popular religious belief' in this writing is both the central aim and objective, but also absent; imagined to be a malleable, indefinite substance which could be manipulated, fought over, and trained by distinctly elite forces.

The most important formulation of popular religious belief across the period of the early Reformations was offered after the muddy and unstable exchanges of dynastic government and religious policy seen in the mid-century, in John Foxe's iconic *Acts and Monuments* (frequently called the *Book of Martyrs*, first edition 1563, with major revisions and additions in 1570, 1583). According to Foxe (an astonishingly able antiquarian, historian and polemicist whose work has only been properly addressed in the last twenty years or so) the history of the Reformations, both in England and across Europe, was a powerful, deeply emotive narrative about the progressive liberation of belief from the corrupting influence of Rome.⁴ This narrative introduced and subsumed the most powerful sections of Foxe's text: the quasi-historical (often documentary) accounts of martyrdoms from the fifteenth-century Wycliffites whose public executions left marks on place names which persist today (Norwich's 'Lollard's Pit'; the 'Lollards' Tower' at Lambeth Palace) to the lurid number of those burnt in Smithfield between 1553 and 1558. The polemical point of Fox's accumulative history is that while isolated individuals in history such as Wycliffe, Jan Huss – or apparently Geoffrey Chaucer and 'Piers Plowman' – were flashes of spiritual light in a 'dark' period between apostolic and contemporary time, by the mid-sixteenth century the population of England were converted and were being brutally persecuted for it. They were also a kind of new *gens dei*, a nation not entirely dissimilar to the Biblical Israelites or Bede's ninth-century vision of the English people. The discourse of national identity is clearly interwoven here with a particular kind of religious historiography, in a way which would command tacit respect and both wide and academic support for centuries. This narrative of persecution, progressive liberation, and national, politico-religious destiny became one of the more precarious foundations of the enlightenment and colonial era construction now generally referred to as 'Whig History'.

Much modern work on the popularity (or not) of belief and confessional identities in the sixteenth-century has had to deal to some extent with the wider cultural heritage outlined above as it commanded – and one might say continues to command, in certain places – an authority which exists outside the academy, but the

⁴ Work on Foxe has been transformed and enabled by the excellent John Fox project, which has included online transcriptions of the different editions of Fox's work. See <http://www.johnfoxe.org/>.

scholarship which shaped the grounds of the controversies over the last century was that of G. R. Elton. In a sequence of books, most notably *The English Reformation* (1964, revised 1989), Elton laid the foundations for a number of the most important flashpoints in Reformation historiography. Elton's first book, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509-1558* (1959), made a localised case for the rise of Protestant belief, and an associated case for the continuity between English Lollardy and the early adoption of Protestantism. Elton's later work continued this thread, arguing that the early sixteenth-century produced a sea-change in popular belief so great that by the time Elizabeth acceded to the throne in 1558 the vast majority of the nation were already Protestant.

Elton's work remains respected (though questioned), but it is worth noting that this picture of religious and cultural change had wider ramifications for the study of the period, particularly in terms of the connections drawn by some between changing religious belief and a *longe dureé* account of early modernity. For Foxe himself, the Reformation of belief came about partly because of the divinely-inspired coincidence of reformism with particular types of media: 'Preachers, Printers, & Players [...] be set up of God, as a triple bulwarke against the triple crown of the Pope'⁵. This claim became its own kind of defence for arguments about the connections between the printing press, Protestantism, and early modernity. Most influentially, Elizabeth Eisenstein's classic study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979, revised and abridged as *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 1983, 1993) made a compelling case for the transformational power of changing technologies of textual reproduction, but also stated explicitly that 'Printing and Protestantism seem to go together naturally'.⁶ While they were engaged in quite distinct scholarly activities, the combination of Elton's and Eisenstein's arguments themselves might be said to 'go together naturally', creating – tacitly if not explicitly – a portrait of the early sixteenth-century as energetically transformative and decisively unlike the culture of previous periods. This is a picture of a period in which it is hard to imagine popular religious belief not being caught up in the teleological and hurried rush of western culture towards something which might be called 'modernity'.

Historiography (II): Popular and Unpopular Religion

⁵ 1570 edition, sig. DDDd3v. See also John N. King, "Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and the History of the Book", *Explorations in Renaissance Culture*, 30 (2004), 171-96.

⁶ Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 43-4, 306.

This picture of the reform of popular belief has been thoroughly questioned by a host of 'revisionist' historians who frequently take the idea of popular religion as their focus. The most influential of these have been J. J. Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh, and Eamon Duffy. Every related concept of the Eltonian Reformation came under attack in this wave of counter-argument. Rather than the pre-Reformation church and laity being morose, sullen, and stolid, awaiting the great enlightenment of Luther and the printing press, the later medieval church is instead an energetic, communal and engaged institution in which the vast majority of the population partake, often with enthusiasm (something, it has to be said, that most medievalists would have known already). Lollardy, for some a democratising and quasi-modern ancestor of Protestantism, becomes an eccentric and geographically specific phenomenon with few adherents and little popular support.⁷ Instead, the early English Reformation becomes something decisively separate from popular belief and practice, a political event driven by monarchical and elite interests. The concept of popular religion is central to this 'revisionist' movement, because it sets out to argue that the reform of religious belief was anything *but* popular. In the introduction to *The Stripping of the Altars*, Duffy writes that:

much writing about late medieval and early modern religion has taken it as axiomatic that there was a wide gulf between "popular" and "élite" religion, that the orthodox teaching of the clergy was poorly understood and only partially practised, that paganism and superstition were rife [...] To judge by the amount of interest that has been shown in them, the English religious landscape of the late Middle Ages was peopled largely by Lollards, witches, and leisured, aristocratic ladies.⁸

The powerful and often compelling recovery of 'traditional' religion that takes place in Duffy's work, in particular, is also a renewal of what Duffy refers to as 'the religious world-view of ordinary men and women': popular religious belief and practice. This rather sharp dismissal of academic interest in niche groups (one might ask why one shouldn't be interested in Lollards, witches, or aristocratic women) is a part of a wider argument of revisionism. Famously, Christopher Haigh posed the

⁷ See, especially, Richard Rex's *The Lollards* (London: Palgrave, 2002), the diminutive length of which is a clue to its wider argument, particularly in comparison to the still vital (and sizable) work in Ann Hudson's *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (Yale University Press, 1992), p. 2. Duffy's preface to the second edition (2005) is also a useful digest of reactions to the book, recording, for example, the traces of a vitriolic exchange between Duffy and the fellow medievalist David Aers.

question of whether the Reformation was something that came 'from above', or 'from below', a question that clearly intersects with the hierarchical conceptualisations which studies of popular culture more generally are still attempting to revise.⁹

While some revisionists have managed to suggest the complexity and patchiness of the progress of altered religious belief over the period with the graceful use of a plural, it is still striking that revisionism relied on the notion of popular religious belief as an argumentative counter to Whig historiography.¹⁰ This movement, however, frequently (if not always) kept the question of popular religious culture closely bound up with confessional categories. While some of these categories (Protestant, Catholic, Puritan, Recusant, Anglican) retain an explanatory power at particular moments, and in particular communities, much of the drive of post-revisionist approaches to popular religion has been to re-categorize some of the historical phenomena – Alexandra Walsham's work on 'Church Papists' is a fine example – or even undermine the efficacy of such a nomenclature.¹¹ It is still worth noting that even if the majority of England's population *were* Protestant by the middle of the sixteenth century, few would have described themselves using that term.¹² More importantly, while we might want the diverse range of things that make up religious identity (theological thought, devotional practice, a communal self-consciousness, shared sensibilities and antipathies) to be coterminous, in many cases this is something that confessional historiography of any allegiance often had to assume using *a priori* labels, rather than something that necessarily existed. As Alec Ryrie has put it, more studies now try 'to move beyond a zero-sum game in which Catholic and Protestant historians each try to count their legions'.¹³

⁹ Christopher Haigh uses the terms a number of times, for example in 'Some Aspects of Recent Historiography of the English Reformation', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), 995-1007, reprinted in his *The English Reformation Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 19-33. On the problem of simplistic divisions between elite and popular see Andrew Hadfield and Matthew Dimmock, eds., *Literature and Popular Culture in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), esp. pp. 1-12.

¹⁰ See, for example, Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993). The phrase is from Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 13.

¹¹ Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 1993).

¹² On this particular word, see Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant: Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), p. 2.

¹³ Alec Ryrie, 'Britain and Ireland', in Ryrie, ed., *Palgrave Advances in the European Reformations* p. 129. Ryrie's comment is directed specifically at geographically localised studies, but might be applied more broadly.

Indeed, a number of noteworthy studies of religious belief in the period have side-stepped this 'zero-sum game' by focusing not necessarily on numerical approaches to what might be considered 'popular' but by paying attention to other phenomenon, such as particular places or communities, multiple conversion between confessions, or the pragmatic complexities than complicate ideas of adherence to religious beliefs. One striking example is Ethan Shagan's *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (2003). Shagan's work – based on evidence such as court proceedings rather than wills or church wardens' accounts – suggests how local and pragmatic priorities were key to a number of ways in which the general population complicitly (rather than ideologically) forwarded the process of reform. As Shagan writes, the reform of popular religious belief 'was not done *to* the people, it was done *with* them'.¹⁴ Similarly, Robert Whiting's work on popular religion in the South West has a number of suggestive points to make about both the importance of locality and adherence. He notes, for example, the possibility of significant differences in religious ideology between urban and rural populations, and that the nature of religious belief was frequently neither uniform nor necessarily 'committed'.¹⁵ Michael Questier's work on conversion both to and from Catholicism, and indeed on multiple experiences of conversion, suggests how transitory and fluid confessional adherence might have been at points.¹⁶ Susan Brigden's monumental *London and the Reformation* (1989) traces the religious beliefs of the capital's people over the course of the sixteenth-century in ways which are all the more compelling for being situated at the level of individual parishes and communities within the metropolis.¹⁷ Tessa Watt, in a seminal work that I return to again in the section on 'Books and Belief', compellingly argues – in ways which dovetail with Shagan's and Whiting's work – that even by the early seventeenth century what 'popular religion' means might be something "post-Reformation", but not thoroughly 'Protestant'.¹⁸ In a number of ways, then, work on popular religious culture in the period has been working past the assumptions of 'popular' and 'elite' which were inherent in

¹⁴ Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 25.

¹⁵ Robert Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 146, 259.

¹⁶ Michael Questier, *Conversion, Politics, and Religion in England, 1580-1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989). Brigden's associated work also makes some suggestive cases for religious beliefs being particularly attractive to certain demographics. See, especially, 'Youth and the English Reformation', *Past and Present*, 95 (1982), 37-67.

¹⁸ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 327.

confessional arguments, towards a muddier and more complicated picture of intersections between religious identity and popular culture.

Books and Belief

Amongst the flashpoints of early controversies about religious belief was that of popular reading and literacy. Famously, Thomas More argued against the need for vernacular biblical translations on the grounds that ‘farre more then fowre partes of all the whole [English population] diuided into tenne, coulde neuer reade englishe yet’, even as he imagined ‘a tynker or a tyler which coulde (as some there can) reade Englishe, and beyng instructed and taught by some olde cunnyng weauer in Wycliffes Wyckette, & Tyndalles books, and Frythes, and frère Barns’ would end up ‘lurking aboute and teaching hys ghospell in corners’.¹⁹ This vision of religious belief as being closely bound up with the idea of a democratisation of literacy (or at least scriptural literacy) was a central part of religious rhetoric in the period. Erasmus stated in 1516 that ‘I would...that the farmer sing some part of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle’. Tyndale similarly vowed ‘I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more of the scripture’ than some of the clergy.²⁰ While some of these claims are problematic (Erasmus’ farmer and weaver would have had to have been rather *avant-garde* to be familiar with the editing and Greek of the *Novum Testamentum*), this argument – that the rise of Protestantism went hand-in-hand with the rises of literacy, the vernacular, and democratisation – has long pervaded popular (and indeed often academic) ideas about the period.²¹ The claims of Eisenstein and Foxe about the advent of print quoted above are also parts of that construction. One might wonder about important qualifications here, such as the legislative history of access to the Bible, not least the *Act for the Advancement of True Religion* (1543), which aggressively restricted readership on the grounds of conservative categories of class and gender. While

¹⁹ Both are from More’s *Apology* (1533), quoted from William Rastell, ed., *The vorkes of Sir Thomas More Knyght, sometyme Lorde Chauncellour of England, wrytten by him in the Englysh tonge* (London: Tottell *et al*, 1557), pp. 850, 924.

²⁰ Erasmus, ‘The Paraclesis’, in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Desiderius Erasmus, Selected Writings*, ed., John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1965), pp. 92-106, 97. Tyndale’s much-quoted words are possibly apocryphal, and come from Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1563), III. 570. On the rhetoric of democratisation, see Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral, 1381-1594: Appropriation and the Writing of Religious Controversy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 85-6.

²¹ See, especially, David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). For a strongly-argued counter, see James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

some of this pervasive idea might be deeply-questionable, the importance of books and literacy to popular religion across the period cannot be understated. However, rather than a broad-brush, 'cultural history' approach to this question, some of the most productive work on books and belief has sought to approach the question of popular belief through the medium of specific types of popular books. As ever, the categorisation of 'popular' is far from straightforward, but a number of approaches are worth singling out. Judith Maltby's *Prayer Book and People in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (1998), for example, traces the history of conformity to the reformed prayer book – and therefore also the reformed version of the liturgy it contained – between the accession of Elizabeth and the outbreak of the Civil War. Maltby's conception of a whole strata of Tudor and Stuart society as 'Prayer Book Protestants' is compelling and has proved highly influential. While avoiding the proselytising of other accounts of the Reformation, Maltby focuses on conformity to the Book of Common Prayer, but in doing so re-situates our sense of popular religion in the network of language and ritual which this central book contained. For generations, ultimately, one book shaped the most wide-spread experience of religious belief and practice, regardless of social status. In many ways, perhaps, Maltby's 'Prayer Book Protestantism' dovetails with Peter Burke's, and others', conceptions of 'popular culture' as a phenomenon – a set of ways of thinking about and experiencing religion – which was prolific and dominant enough to be part of almost all culture in the period: elite, inclusive and all.²² The study of the *Book of Common Prayer* as both a text and a set of liturgical ritual and song has recently been enabled by the work of Brian Cummings, who has edited the texts of 1549, 1559 and 1662 for Oxford World's Classics. Cummings' introduction to the volume could be read as a case for the *Book of Common Prayer* being the single most influential document of popular culture in the period.²³ Elsewhere, books remain a vital part of discussions about religious belief in the period. Ian Green's monumental *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England* (1993) has been followed by further substantial work on catechisms – again, probably one of the most pervasive ways in which large

²² A useful essay on conceptions of popular culture is Sue Wiseman, "Popular Culture': A Category for Analysis?', in Hadfield and Dimmock, eds., *Literature and Popular Culture*, pp. 15-28. The forms of ritual and prayer contained in the *Book of Common Prayer* also work well with Natalie Zemon Davis' conception of popular culture as 'that which is most mobile, most exchangeable, most ready at hand in all areas of a culture', cited in Wiseman, p. 21. It is worth noting, too, that religious books – especially printed sermons and Sternhold's and Hopkins' ubiquitous metrical psalms – were amongst the most widely circulated texts in the period.

²³ Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

numbers of early modern people experienced religion at a basic level.²⁴ Another immensely influential work is Tessa Watt's *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (1991). Watt explicitly situates her study of the period's most accessible books within arguments about popular culture, including Peter Burke's study, and focuses on the 'commonplace mentalities', the 'unconscious or semi-conscious values and assumptions' produced through a reading of these volumes. Acutely aware of the dangers of implying the existence of a singular, stratified idea of 'popular piety', Watt produces a compelling portrait of a complex 'mosaic' of popular religious belief through cheap books. While not entirely new as an idea – Laura Stevenson had previously used the idea of regularly re-printed literary books as the basis for a category of 'popular culture' – Watt's work remains essential reading for those interested in the ways in which books and religious belief were connected in the period.²⁵

Belief, Practice, and Performance

As the centrality of books and the types of evidence historical studies depend upon might suggest, one of the difficulties with pursuing the nature of popular religious belief in the early Modern period (indeed any period) is the essential privacy of 'belief' itself. Writing at the start of the twentieth century, the great philosopher of religion William James (brother of novelist Henry) described the process of religious conversion in poetic but telling terms:

Neither an outside observer nor the subject who undergoes the process can explain fully how particular experiences are able to change one's centre of energy so decisively, or why they so often have to bide their hour to do so. We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peels through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are

²⁴ Ian Green, *The Christian's ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530-1740* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁵ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See, also, Laura Caroline Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Stevenson's excellent analysis includes an appendix of popular texts, which she classifies as those which went through at least three editions in the decade after their first appearance (though she excludes Bibles, textbooks and translations). The resulting list would make a fine starting point for a study of popular literature.

dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to re-crystallize about it.²⁶

Amongst James' intriguing language – full of images of Church bells ('peel') and biochemical movements ('cold', 'hot', 're-crystallize') – the experience of changing belief, or perhaps even feeling the difference between a thought and a belief – remains unknowable both to 'subject' and 'outside observer', even as it becomes palpably, even centrally, important to the individual. Religious historians have found that not only are there 'complex definitional and evidential problems' with recovering religious beliefs, but that 'belief' itself can remain 'intangible and illusive'.²⁷ While transhistorical, even anthropological, approaches to popular religion remain important – Carlo Ginzberg's *The Cheese and the Worms* is often used as a touchstone here – the fact remains that historical beliefs are only recoverable through the way in which those beliefs were practised in material terms, or the way in which they are performed in or through textual records.²⁸ Court records, wills, Church wardens' accounts and narrative chronicles all bring their own evidentiary problems and limitations with them.

One important direction over recent years has been towards studies of religion in the period that focus less on traditional 'documentary' sources of evidence, and more on literary sources. While such 'evidence' is no less problematic, it is notable that the 'linguistic turn' in historical studies has coincided with a 'religious turn' in early Modern literary studies. It is striking that a great deal of work done on religious belief over the course of the last decades has come not from scholars one might describe as religious historians but from literary critics, broadly understood. Tessa Watt's seminal *Cheap Print and Popular Piety* (1991) is an important example, as is Brian Cummings' *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (2002). While Cummings' book might be said to focus on elite writers (Luther and More, Tyndale and Erasmus, through Wyatt, Spenser and Donne, to Milton) it ultimately produces a rich tableau about the ways in which theological ideas and

²⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in Human Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 165-6.

²⁷ Peter Marshall, *Religious Identities in Henry VIII's England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 19-42, 19. Marshall is referring specifically to the phenomenon of conversion, though the comments are more widely applicable.

²⁸ Carlo Ginzberg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980). For an outline of such anthropological approaches, see P. M. Soergel, 'Popular Religion', in Ryrice, ed. *Palgrave Advances in the European Reformations*.

arguments thread their way through literary writing, emerging in powerful but also frequently paradoxical ways in writing whose audience is not restricted to theologians as such.

Spiritual autobiography – an increasingly important genre of writing as the period goes on – is also an area in which religious belief and literary studies coalesce. While some scholarship might turn to such texts as straightforward evidence about historical individuals, other work has increasingly emphasised just how generically framed such autobiographies are: ‘an elaborate form of self-fashioning’, as one scholar has put it.²⁹ Some important historians of later Protestantism have – for a long time – argued that religious identities were part of a hostile two-way relationship: in a sense, that religious belief and identity in the period were created through the performance of polemical ideas of difference. Patrick Collinson, the great historian of English Puritanism, has long suggested that ‘Puritanism’ itself was ‘not a thing definable in itself but only one half of a stressful relationship.’³⁰ However, again, it might be more important that these texts bring us into proximity with ‘popular’ religious sentiment, at least amongst some of the population, because of the ubiquity and persistence of ways of thinking about religious experience in narrative terms. ‘I once was blind but now I see’ might remain a powerful way of recording the experience of religious belief, however many times it is repeated in different forms and in different cultures.³¹ Kathleen Lynch’s recent *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (2012) continues this interest, and Alexandra Walsham’s work has shown that the providentialism once assumed to be an exclusive aspect of puritan belief was shared across the spectrum of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture, even as puritans intuitively fashioned

²⁹ See, for example, Michael Davies, ‘Shaping Grace: The Spiritual Autobiographies of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and John Newton’, *Bunyan Studies: John Bunyan and His Times*, 12 (2007), 36-69, and Davies’ monograph, *Graceful Reading: Theology and Narrative in the Works of John Bunyan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The quotation is from Alexandra Walsham, ‘The godly and popular culture’, in John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 277-293, 289.

³⁰ Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant English* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988), p. 143. On this point, see also Collinson, ‘Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Creation of Puritanism’, in John Guy, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 150-170.

³¹ The phrase, and point, is borrowed from an excellent discussion of conversion narratives in Molly Murray, *The Poetics of Conversion in Early Modern English Literature: Verse and Change from Donne to Dryden* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 27.

themselves as a beleaguered minority at odds with the luke-warm beliefs of the majority.³²

This 'literary turn' in some studies of religious belief in the period is noteworthy, because the methodological differences have also allowed the kinds of questions posed and answered to be more nuanced and less empirical. Peter Lake's work is another fine example. While still, of course, a 'historian', Lake's willingness to read narrative and dramatic texts as sources, and frequently to do so with the sophistication and acuteness of a literary critic, has produced some important arguments. For example, arguing against some revisionist historians, Lake takes issue with the idea of Protestantism as an ideology of elitism set in perpetual opposition to the 'people', a picture of religious belief centred on literacy and the much repeated 'Reformation of Manners'.³³ Instead, through a reading of a sequence of cheap 'Murder pamphlets', Lake suggests how religious belief exists in a more complex relationship with popular forms than we might expect, allowing synthesis and opportunistic overlap in genres which might be said to be *both* popular and Protestant.³⁴

Another strand in recent 'literary-historical' studies of the Reformations needs to be mentioned. Enabled by some revisionist studies (especially Duffy's *The Stripping of the Altars*), a sequence of books have appeared by high-profile scholars of medieval writing who have developed an interest in diachronic studies of literary, cultural and religious change across the later Middle Ages and the usually sacrosanct barrier of the Reformation. Important examples are James Simpson's *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (2010) and Sarah Beckwith's *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (2011). These works have their own argumentative agendas, born out of a drive to interrogate the institutionalisation of cultural epochs and what both see as the misprision of many traditional claims about early modernity. Like earlier revisionists, much of this scholarship, and the way it is written, partakes in the combative energies of the Reformation's debates over theology, belief and practice, even as it offers a powerful critique of some of the cultural claims about the place of Protestantism in the construction of liberal traditions. They also, though, harbour a deep antipathy

³² Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³³ For a discussion of the idea of the Puritan 'Reformation on Manners', see Walsham, 'The godly and popular culture', 279-282.

³⁴ Peter Lake, 'Deeds against Nature: Cheap Print, Protestantism, and Murder in Early Seventeenth-Century England', in Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake, eds., *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 257-283.

towards Protestantism – popular or not – imagined as a culturally impoverished, tyrannical cultural movement whose modern inheritance is not an Eisenstein-like enlightenment but a ‘dark’, anxious and aggressive thread in western modernity. In some ways, rather than a focus on the historical detail of specific periods, this work acts as a modern heir to Max Weber’s sociological analysis of the ‘Spirit’ of capitalism and its connections to Calvinist thought and culture, but in a way which is strikingly hostile. As a reviewer of Beckwith’s book puts it, this is an image of ‘a Reformed tradition figured in [...] unremittingly negative terms [...] a dismissal of all that medieval Catholicism is supposed to represent: the communal, the certain, the knowable, the pastorally reassuring. For Beckwith, Protestantism is inhumanly devoid of all such humane facets’.³⁵

Another important and nascent area of inquiry here is the theatrical performance of religion on the early modern stage. While the professional theatres of London are sometimes rather tendentiously viewed as sources of a newly secularized identity – particularly in Stephen Greenblatt’s numerous works – others have sought to trace the ways in which religious practice was ‘played’.³⁶ Elizabeth Williamson, for example, traces the ways in which religious objects (rosaries, books and so on) were used as symbolic objects in stage performances.³⁷ Other studies, particularly the work of Alison Shell and Arthur Marotti, have sought to uncover the ways in which theatrical and literary works produced a kind of popular anti-Catholicism which is ingrained also in more recent culture.³⁸ Peter Lake’s and Michael Questier’s massive *The Antichrist’s Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (2002) is another important study. Given the way in which some early modern drama explicitly stages devotional culture and religious

³⁵ As Davis continues: ‘Yet it could easily be objected that ‘reformed versions of grace’ are hardly without humanity, human agency, or a sense of community. Far from it, one might argue’, Michael Davis, review of Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, *Review of English Studies*, 63 (2012), 504-506, 505.

³⁶ See, especially, Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). For sharp critiques of Greenblatt’s work, see David Aers, ‘A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the ‘History of the Subject,’ in Aers, ed., *Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing* (London: Harvester, 1992) and Sarah Beckwith, ‘Stephen Greenblatt’s Hamlet and the Forms of Oblivion’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), 261-280.

³⁷ Elizabeth Williamson, *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

³⁸ See, especially, Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Arthur F. Marotti, *Religious Ideology and Cultural Fantasy: Catholic and Anti-Catholic Discourses in Early Modern England* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

difference, a number of plays have not been read until recently in terms of what they reveal about popular religion only because of their comparative obscurity. Some recent work has sought to rectify this, and David Womersley's ambitious *Divinity and State* (2010) is also likely to make an important body of 'Reformation History Plays' better known by placing them in dialogue with better known Shakespearian works and their chronicle sources.³⁹ Much further work remains to be done on these plays, because in important ways such performances can be seen to both reflect and create widely-disseminated conceptions about the nature and meaning of religion in the period, at least in England's capital. These very different approaches to the question of popular religious belief in the early Modern period have opened the field to future work of even more various kinds. This variety of approach is itself a positive thing, as taken together these approaches might allow scholars to react to Tessa Watt's eloquent comments, written now over twenty years ago:

'Religion' cannot just be measured in terms of knowledge of particular doctrines, or attendance at Church [...] We must also look at the hazier area of images, emotions and fears; of the rules by which people ordered their lives [...] of how people placed themselves in history and the universe'.⁴⁰

³⁹ David Womersley, *Divinity and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and see also Teresa Grant and Barbara Ravelhofer, eds., *English Historical Drama 1500-1660: Forms outside the Canon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008) and Paulina Kewes, ed., *The Uses of History in Early Modern England* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 2006).

⁴⁰ Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, p. 327.