Religion

Lori Anne Ferrell

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S RELIGION HAS long invited scrutiny and speculation. For many scholars and critics, but especially those for whom artists' biographies provide forensic tools, whether the playwright was Anglican or Puritan, Catholic or Protestant, skeptic or humanist can explain why the upright Angelo of *Measure for Measure*, lusting in his heart, confesses to the Duke, "I should be guiltier than my guiltiness, / To think I can be undiscernible" (*MM* 5.1.63–65), or why Hamlet, spying on Claudius praying (as he thinks) alone, muses that to kill him "in the purging of his soul, / When he is fit and seasoned for his passage" (*Ham.* 3.3.85–86) would thwart the working of just revenge. It can argue for Hermione's miraculous resurrection in *The Winter's Tale*, as Paulina tells her doubting audience onstage, "It is required / You awake your faith" (*WT* 5.3.100), a demand that Lear's final lament, "Never, never, never, never, never!" (*Lear* 5.3.307–08), may well negate.

Public conditions of faith

What should underwrite our interpretations of these and other lines, however, are the astonishingly singular and public *conditions* of faith that both constrained and liberated the times in which Shakespeare lived. Shakespeare's career spanned an age defined, as it had been since time out of mind, by the outward profession of Christianity. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the challenge to traditional belief did not – indeed it could not yet – give way to the exercise of what we might consider *individual* choice and *free* will: the words *choice* and *will* carried very different meanings then, both theologically and socially, and as a consequence were not liable to be so modified. Although there was nothing particularly *private* about religion in early modern England, its reformations of doctrine and worship meant that matters of corporate belief could readily turn into cases of conscience. In other words, there was everything *personal* about religion in early modern England.

England's reformations (for they were many, reflecting the successive religious and political dispositions of four very different Tudor monarchs) were distilled from a turbid mix: faith by statute, filtered through clerical interpretation and popular understanding. It would take more than a century of monarchical oversight to convert the English people out of habits of thought instilled in nearly a millennium of Roman Catholic tradition, but this cultural reindoctrination only gained real traction when in 1558 the twin scepters of church and state were taken up by Elizabeth I, the last in a line of remarkably unsettled – in matters of religion as well as matters of domesticity – Tudor monarchs. By the end of the queen's nearly fifty-year reign, a multitude of contenders had clamored for the right to define and express the faith of the Church of England. But the reforming movements of the late sixteenth century – Protestant, Catholic, *and* sectarian – would not, and indeed could not, usher in a new age of religious plurality.

What they reaped in fact was the whirlwind, for the legitimacy of England's Protestantism or Catholicism was never contested in this period, but the validity of its *Christianity* was. Under such circumstances, religious toleration was, quite simply and literally, inconceivable. Any other terms of debate, after all, would have acknowledged and thus tacitly accepted a state of permanent religious division in western Christendom, and until the eighteenth century such an idea remained virtually unthinkable – for Protestants, Catholics, and even sectaries, all of whom believed that *their* version of the faith was the only true one. No acceptable models of principled religious difference – except the time-honored, much-refined, and very often fatal categories *heresy* and *schism*, with their painfully legal requirements for correction – existed for the disparate religious protagonists of early modern England. And so, with nothing less than salvation (as one historian has noted with a fine irony) *at stake*, the consequences were always vociferous and often violent, exposing the consciences of a few brave (or foolhardy) individuals to the scrutiny of a public invariably enthralled by spectacle.

LOSS OF SHARED FAITH

The conditions of cultural drama betrayed the confusion into which English society had been plunged by the unnerving betrayal of its deepest sense of identity: its shared faith. Early modern English men and women not only assumed they were *required* to hold but also in fact *longed* to hold religious values in common trust. Christian unity and religious uniformity, of course, had always been notions concocted for an ideal, not quotidian, world – but it was *that* orderly society of all souls, more than any particular confession or creed, in which English people believed.

In this belief, they were aided by the structure of their state's all-encompassing spiritual provision. The Church of England, a single institution established by law to which until the eighteenth century all English subjects were compelled to attend under penalty of fine or imprisonment, had held an unbroken and virtually unchallenged claim to the soul of every subject in the kingdom since the early Middle Ages. Even after its sixteenth-century reformations, it retained this sacred monopoly – along with the ecclesiastical structures and nearly all the governmental and judiciary functions it had wielded in its Roman Catholic past.

What the Church lost in its reformations, however, is also notable: two crucial doctrines; five sacraments; myriad comforting cultural assumptions about the nature of death and divine intercession; the miraculous justification for its priestly authority; most of its saints; much of its mystery – and, perhaps most significantly, its place in a larger Christian empire united under the leadership of popes. No longer merely one among many European defenders of the Roman faith, the English monarch was now Supreme Head of the Church in – and now *of* – England. Religion in England thus remained a matter not only of public profession but also of regulated expression. The duty, both secularly and divinely ordered, for people to profess beliefs according to the rule of orthodoxy (as defined by the Church), and worship according to laws concerning uniformity (as defined by the state), remained virtually unchanged during this otherwise tumultuous period.

Both the spirit and the technology of the age, however, conspired in the dissemination of new – or the defense of old – ideas. Thriving as never before in the heady sphere created by the operations of the printing press, these threatened political authority and doctrinal norms, disrupted cultural practices, and challenged the institutional structures long mandated by governmental and ecclesiastical statute. The controversies sparked by such dangerous speech gained polemical weight with every impress of a platen.

The authors of books, pamphlets, and broadsides claimed, generally more sensationally than accurately, that early modern England was the central theater of the disruptive and devastating religious wars roiling all of sixteenth-century Christendom. But in this small, insular kingdom – from which the Jews had been expelled in 1260 and wherein The Turk was more likely to be found strolling the stage than out on the streets – the struggle for Christian souls was intraconfessional in nature, waged entirely between Catholic and Protestant champions. Disputants nonetheless routinely deployed terms more hyperbolically metaphorical than theologically correct; by the early seventeenth century, establishment clerics were shocked to find themselves described in print as *judaizing* or *mahometan*, even as they branded their equally mainstream opponents as *puritans* and *papists* – or even *puritan-papists*, surely the hardest-working cultural construct in an age of paradox and uncertainty. Religious moderation held little value in this age of religious extremism. Religious language followed suit.

William Shakespeare was a curious, observant, and well-informed observer of this clamorous religious culture, which was continually under construction during his lifetime. In it, the new wine of Protestant doctrine constantly threatened to burst the old bottles of institution and society into which it had been often forcibly decanted, and wherein the personal demands of conscience constantly threatened to break the bonds that had knit together the collective heart of a national church for centuries. This chapter, then, will decline to speculate on the personal beliefs of a man who, like most early modern English men and women, left no definitive clues as to their nature, and instead describe the evolving state of English Christianity before, during, and after the many reformations of Shakespearean England.

BEFORE THE CHURCH: CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE IN THE WEST, AD 100–700

There has always been a Catholic Church in England – or at least this is how it must have seemed to the people in its sixteenth-century naves, aisles, pews, and burial grounds. But Augustine of Canterbury (d. 609) did not bring the Christianity of Rome to the Christians of the British Isles until the end of the sixth century of the Common Era. Within two hundred years, this *Ecclesia Angliae, non angeliae* had consented to the rule of popes and to a faith expressed officially in Latin. The medieval Church of England was now an outpost of western Christendom and, until the later reign of Henry VIII (r. 1509–47), Rome demanded – and, for the most part, received – its religious obedience.

The partisan, minority reports of the origins of this faith, contained in the collected first- and second-century texts early Christians called (to distinguish them from the Jewish books they elected to retain, recasting *them* as prophetically "old") their "new" testament, abound with verifiably historical facts, names, and dates. Chapter 2 of the Gospel of Luke might have been written by any conscientious classical historian (as in fact it demonstrably

was): *And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed; and this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria* (Luke 2.2 KJV). But at the same time it prosaically fixes the time and date for the birth of Jesus. This, like all the other books of the New Testament, was also lyrically, evocatively mythic, drawing on Jewish scriptures, Greek philosophy, and Roman theophanies for inspiration, illustration, and – with the political triumph of Christianity still awaiting the imperial reign of Constantine the Great (d. 337) – impassioned, incandescent defense of the man they believed was the miraculously resurrected son of God.

Obsession with death

The need for such illuminating apologetics was great. Christianity posed a dizzyingly logical, yet paradoxical, proposition: that as a "son of man" Jesus was wholly human – fleshly heir to heartache and a thousand natural shocks – but at the same time entirely divine and thus impervious to, and ultimately unscathed by, such corporeal frailty. Only someone truly and fully human could credibly and adequately represent humanity at the throne of divine judgment; only a divinity could rise from the dead and claim part in the Trinitarian deity that Christians, determinedly (if not demonstrably) monotheist from their Jewish origins, insisted was the singular, indivisible God who alone could save them, too, from the awful finality of death.

Such reassurance was necessary, as early Christians faced imprisonment and death for their beliefs under a succession of Roman emperors in the first, second, and third centuries of the Common Era. Early Christian writings are rife, then, with exhortations to remain courageous in the face of public condemnation and political persecution. The tales of packed arenas and hungry lions, of Christians bloodily sacrificed for gladiatorial spectacle, are almost certainly exaggerated. No matter; as one early writer noted, the blood of Christians would water a fulsome harvest of new believers. To model one's own death on Christ's was not only to pay extraordinary homage to personal belief but also to brand Christianity with a reputation for willingness to die at the hands of a persecuting authority, to make a public and dramatic profession of the faith. These attitudes would remain, even after 325, when Christianity became the state religion of what was left of a crumbling Roman Empire, and, later, its European remnant, renamed "Holy" by the emperor Charlemagne in 800.

In any case, Christians were much obsessed with death, for, they believed, death was the rightful penalty for their state of essential and inescapable sinfulness. As the Old Testament book of Genesis and the New Testament epistles of Paul taught, human disobedience tainted even the purity of the Garden of Eden; once bidden into existence,

it had remained, perpetual thorn in all flesh, thereafter. (As a famous medieval catechism observed, in pithy doggerel: "in Adam's fall we sinneth all.") Jesus' triumph over death thus also modeled hope to those who, aware of sin's penalty, believed that God's righteous judgment could be ameliorated by this unfathomably sacrificial act: these beliefs make up the Christian doctrine of salvation. But for Christians, who were enjoined to believe in this doctrine and proclaim it as a universal truth, Jesus's human atonement for humanity's sins and his divine saving of their souls nonetheless had to be fashioned into plain-speaking realities, ideas that could be credibly and persuasively demonstrated to all, even those outside the infinitesimally small ranks of the theologically educated and scripturally literate.

Schemes of time

The peculiar genius of medieval Latin Christianity was to organize this improbable set of theological paradoxes and philosophical niceties into a regularly scheduled, quantifiably logical, tangibly material, and easily memorized system. The program began with a rigorous organization of time. By the Middle Ages, the liturgical year, with its saints' and feast days and sacred seasons, connected the ecclesiastical calendar to the rhythms of human life (planting, growing, harvest; birth, marriage, death; twelve days of Christmas, forty days of Lent, Eastertide). This unceasing round punctuated everyday activity with holy associations, with intimate, applicable reckonings performed on fingers' ends: one creed, three members of the Trinity, seven deadly sins, Ten Commandments.

As befitted a faith proclaimed by way of the miraculous and philosophical to the almost entirely illiterate, culturally disparate populations of western Europe, the Christianity promulgated by the Roman papacy in the Middle Ages possessed a pragmatic sense of the broadly performative and brightly symbolic when it came to formulating, teaching, and enforcing matters of orthodox religion. From the punctilious handling of works and days, then, proceeded a host of practices, formal and informal, that bestowed practical and imaginative life on the pieties of those we might otherwise mistake for unworldly, culturally impoverished laypeople.

The origins of a national church, 700–1500

Not only the medieval calendar but also the medieval landscape bore the marks of ecclesiastical division and possession. By the 700s, the Roman Catholic Church in England had allocated its disparate spiritual responsibilities into discrete geographic units. These catchments, or *dioceses*, were served by clergymen, or *curates*, whose job it was to hear confession, say Mass, celebrate Communion, baptize children, marry couples, bury the dead, say

prayers, calculate penance, and grant absolution from sin – of course, that was only the job description de jure. Clerical and lay anecdotes alike abounded with examples of priestly extracurricular activities: administering physic, performing scribal duties, generally serving as the informal local court of first – and last – resort. Reports of lax and immoral priests were, of course, also abundant – possibly more so because they made for better, more salacious stories. And a priest's responsibilities did not end at the church's gateposts. His work spanned the length and breadth of the parish, which, except in the extreme north of England, generally comprised one town and the lands around it; large cities such as London or York were subdivided into many small parishes, providing the metropolis with a familiar and close-knit set of communities.

In this basic way, England's parochial structure allied the provision of civil administration with the provision of spiritual care. Its jurisdictional boundaries may have made the church the focal point of both local government and community worship, but the church was more than an edifice. It was the central motif in a landscape alive with Christian symbolism both comfortingly homely and astonishingly miraculous. This building and its grounds played host to the visual languages of a complex faith, taught by a male clergy set apart by their distinctive mode of life (single and celibate), their distinctive mode of formal dress (ceremonial and ensign), and their mysterious ability to perform religious rites, the most emblematic and dramatic of these being the capacity to summon the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ out of bread and wine in the sacrament called the Eucharist.

They also preached. Right thinking and good behavior came in at both the eye *and* the ear in the medieval church: in vernacular homilies drawn from the Bible, by Jacobus de Voraign's collection of saints' lives in *Legenda Aurea*, and local anecdotes; with carved crosses and statues on crossbeams, in niches and aisles; and in didactic illustrations on walls and windows. Paintings of Jesus' gentle and obedient mother, Mary; saints triumphant over a host of fascinatingly cruel martyrdoms; or the wicked getting their comeuppance at the Day of Judgment reinforced the messages conveyed in a weekly service otherwise issued in Latin (the word "Mass" comes from the Latin *missa*, the *nunc dimittus* in the concluding words of the service). From weekly repetition, the foreign words would have become as familiar as the images on the walls – sound cues that sent men and women to their knees, to their beads, or to the altar rail.

SEVEN SACRAMENTS

The dispensation of everyday miracles was, then, the work of the medieval Roman Catholic Church (and thus, by extension, of the medieval Church of England), which built its ministry around the uniform administration of seven sacraments: "visible form(s) of invisible grace"

(definition courtesy of the *other* Saint Augustine, who wrote *The Confessions* and died in 430). Sacraments earned this distinction by virtue of having been instituted by Christ (except marriage, which had to take a very roundabout track to scriptural sanction; as befits a charismatic sect expecting the imminent end of the world, the writers of the Gospels had little use for lifelong institutions, whether marital *or* ecclesiastical, and therefore had little good to say about it). Linking formal, elevated speech to everyday, mundane materials (water, oil, bread, wine), the Church routinely reenacted in the lives of the laity the rites of passage experienced by Jesus, whose birth, baptism, entrance into public life, and death had been recorded in the Gospels.

Baptism – sprinkling with water – marked the entrance of an infant into the serried ranks of all Christendom. Confirmation – tracing the sign of the cross with oil – sealed that same child into the membership of the Church. And Extreme Unction – in which the priest made the same sign (alas, often all too soon thereafter, in this era of heart-rendingly high infant mortality) – ushered that same soul out of the visible church and into the invisible assembly of Christians now residing in all eternity. These three rites, accompanied by set prayers and doctrinal formulas and required to be performed the same way in *every* parish of *every* region of *every* state church over which the pope ultimately claimed jurisdiction, illustrate just how firmly the sacraments of the Church of England allied Christian practice to every significant transaction of individual and family life, forging a uniform, corporate identity that cut across kingdoms, regions, social classes, and even the bounds of mortality itself, for, in this age, death was life's insistently intimate companion and, as in every age, it came for all. Opulent cathedrals and humble churchyards alike reeked of its ubiquity. Medieval society thrummed with long-standing cultural concerns about death and dying, creating local rituals that a remarkably astute and responsive papacy then adopted and enjoined onto the rest of Christendom. Much of the distinctiveness of Christian belief and practice at this time, for example, was inspired by a concept without direct biblical precedent, that immediately after death, human souls went neither to hell nor to heaven but to an intermediary locale called purgatory. This long-standing idea only became an enforceable article of faith, in England as elsewhere in Europe, in the twelfth century, thereby giving death not only a starring but also a permanent role in the great theater of medieval Catholic life.

PURGATORY

Like all extrascriptural beliefs, purgatory solved an irksome problem in the logical understanding (and thus, by extension, the popular teaching) of an otherwise intractable doctrinal crux: how divine punishment related to the varying nature and degrees of sinfulness rendered

obvious by the simple observation of peoples' lives. The Bible taught that all had sinned, falling short of the glory of God, but common sense revealed that some people were simply more sinful than others. How then could a fair, eternal accounting be rendered? How much contrition was enough? How could the anxieties of those left behind be relieved?

The answer lay in extra efforts made by both the individual and the community. Purgatory was by its very nature built for eventual escape (with some souls taking longer, of course, than others). Its requirements could only be mitigated by human expedient: before death, restitution paid in advance in acts of charity, pilgrimage, or crusade; after death, restitution by friends, family, and the Church, whose task it was to offer prayers and alms for the souls of the departed. By the late Middle Ages, it became routine to pay to avoid these experiences: securing prayers from professional petitioners in the clergy called chantry priests or substituting remuneration for the rigors of crusading (sea voyages and military service, like childbearing, having been accurately assessed as nearly inevitably fatal enterprises at this time).

The doctrine of purgatory thus rationalized, equalized, and eventually commodified the relationship between human sin and its eternal consequences. It connected the Church to believers by means of its prayers on their behalf, it bound together generations of the dead and living in an ongoing round of commemoration and obligation, and (not least) it allowed for some fine adventures on the road to the Holy Land – or to Canterbury: the veneration of martyrs in early Christianity had by this time given way to the cult of saints, in England as everywhere. Shrines to men and women of exemplary (if sometimes suspect) holiness and wonder-working dotted the English landscape, along with holy wells, holy crosses, and other sites of interest to English pilgrims who, like the wife of Bath and her traveling companions, were intent not only on paying homage but on taking full advantage of the benefits – both in this world and the next – of religious tourism.

But the essential, defining sacrament in this busy, peripatetic, and sociable culture was the one that symbolized Jesus' ongoing, hospitable, and incarnate relationship to his people. The Eucharist was the centerpiece of medieval worship – understandably so, as its enactment in the Mass transmogrified the everyday elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus, which, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation – another article of faith dating from the twelfth century (and much indebted to that age's recovery of Aristotelian philosophy for its articulation) – retained only the material appearance of food and drink, its true substance having been changed into God at the words *hoc est corpus meum* ("this is my body") spoken by the presiding priest.

The awe with which this sacrament was regarded was such that, by the thirteenth century, laypeople had to be ordered to participate at least once annually, and by ingesting the bread but not the wine. Too easily spilled, and too obviously rubicund, it had become too truly sanguinary for the sensibilities of lay communicants; sensitive to these concerns, the Church soon managed to commission the writing of a doctrine of Communion "in both kinds," postulating that both blood and body could be considered as incorporate in the wafer alone.

Most laypeople took Communion to order, although priests performed this miracle in parishes weekly (and oftener, sometimes daily, in chantries, cathedrals, monasteries, and the private chapels of monarchs and nobles). But the body of Christ required – and received – as constant attention from laypeople as it did from ordained priests. What its wheaten form required from ordinary folk, however, was adulation, not mastication: medieval people appear to have done everything possible to honor the Host *except* take and eat it. Otherwise their devotion was limited only to the scope of their imaginations – and, where something as supernatural as the Eucharist was concerned, that extent was considerable indeed. Congregations gazed on the wafer during the part of the Mass called the "elevation," but they also embroidered linens to decorate the altars on which it was offered up. They knew it was to be kept secreted behind curtains or in wall niches between rituals, but they also built elaborate, richly decorated containers, *pyxes*, in which to house it when they took it out and paraded it, thus safely and beautifully displayed, in the streets on the annual late spring celebration named for its true state as *Corpus Christi*. They sang of its beauty; they told stories of its thaumaturgic power; and they composed, produced, and acted out biblical dramas in its honor, staging them on the streets of larger English towns such as York, Coventry, and Norwich.

All these publicly staged manifestations of lay Eucharistic desire indicate that the liturgy of the Mass itself, despite being performed in Latin, must nonetheless have been a spectacularly dramatic engine delivering an irresistible idea: that the body of Christ belonged not only *in* church but also *among* ordinary folks. The very laity who held the transubstantiated body and blood of Jesus at an awestruck arm's length on Easter were at the same time prepared to celebrate the Real Presence in ways both knowing and witty, showcasing their theological understandings with a remarkable, charming combination of laudable decorousness and infectious panache.

Dramatizing the Bible

The robust fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century street dramas, or *Mysteries*, wherein Bible stories were dramatized – and, inevitably, embellished – provide us with singular evidence of the canny sophistication of this plainspoken lay theologizing. As enacted on pageant wagons moving along city streets, actors playing, for instance, the

sassy characters of Noah's wife (given neither name nor voice in the book of Genesis) and her "gossips" (who do not feature in scripture) querulously defy their male kin, daringly question God's intention to destroy their town, get drunk on bottles of Malmsey, and begin to wail as the rain begins to fall. The tipsy Gossips, chorus for a sinful community, perish. Mrs. Noah is hauled onto the ark at the eleventh hour and, in ungracious response to her salvation, boxes her husband's ear. The boat rises and begins to rock. Forty days at sea restores not only God's relationship with humanity (as recorded in scripture) but also, closer to home (if not to scriptural precedent), the marital harmony of the Noahs.

In the interstices of this Old Testament tale, then, amateur players unschooled in theology performed local variations on the doctrinal significations encoded in the figure of Noah's Ark, reminding their audience that women were important figures in the medieval community if not, generally speaking, in the Bible; that life two-by-two could be rough going, whether at sea or in the fishbowl of a community's gaze; that God's authority, like that of kings, husbands, and fathers, might not be resisted but could be questioned – because it was, sometimes, unfathomable. Far from condemning as blasphemous such loose dealings with the original text, the Church encouraged these beautifully humane plays (as it did a great many local saints and local customs) as both entertaining and instructive.

The word *communion*, then, describes not only the central sacrament of the medieval church but also its public and corporate nature, expressed in the artful negotiation between ecclesiastical doctrine, individual behavior, and community norms of entertainment, neighborliness, and hospitality that was the central feature of medieval English Christianity. Breaches of neighborliness were, after all, breaches of the Commandments, with their indictments against dishonoring elders, coveting others' goods, and committing adultery. As a prerequisite for Communion, all persons had to be reconciled to members of the parish with whom they might be at odds. This is why the sacrament of *Confession* was so often called by the name of its inevitable partner, *Penance*, for the performance of public acts of contrition necessarily followed the personal disclosure of sins – which, after all, carried consequences for the entire Christian community. The combined prayers of priest and people thus ensured not only that the time spent by family, friends, or neighbors in purgatory would be shortened but that these members of the parish would remain on peaceful terms.

Belief and the senses

With this reminder of a medieval community's obvious and mutual responsibility, we return – from chantry, crusade, *Corpus Christi* play, or pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Becket – to the centrality of the medieval belief that the lives of the living were necessarily and inextricably bound up with the fates of those dead and gone, and with the individual performances in corporate celebrations that defined Christian society in this communal age. The knowledge of sin, the reality of death, the need for salvation, and the capacity for people to address these uncomfortable realities not only through their own actions but also with the cooperation of others and the Church allied people to their parish communities and allowed them a corporate agency made, in a word, *sensible*.

Just before the reformations of the sixteenth century, then, the world of English religion was imbued with indelible associations: with the larger European world of western Christendom under the authority of the Roman papacy and its teachings; with the local community and its everyday life and worship; and with the official recording and celebration of the birth, death, and eternal fate of every man, woman, and child in the land. The medieval Church of England, into whose membership every English subject was entered upon their baptism as infants, was thus a *visible* institution in every sense of that significant word. The flock may have been *illiterate* in the strict sense (i.e., they lacked scholarly knowledge of – if not aural familiarity with – Latin), and the greatest portion of the faithful were unlettered entirely, but this laity nonetheless understood what went on, in and out of church. They articulated and lived out the language of Christian community with facility and exuberance. For its part, the Church tended to cast a tolerant eye on the laity's understanding of the relationship between God, Church, and daily life.

The triumph of the word, 1500–1625

The advantage that the traditional Church thus could and did claim against the ideas promoted in the first half of the sixteenth century by the followers of Martin Luther was its fostering of a logical and pragmatic relationship between the faith that it declared, the salvation that it offered to all, and the range of expression it allowed in the service of those doctrines. A puzzle still exercising scholars is how exactly a new version of the faith managed to triumph over the colorful and comfortable old religion professed since time out of mind in England. The advent of Protestantism shattered, as it had in all of Europe, the worldview that had supported and justified this all-inclusive, parochial Christianity. William Shakespeare's parents experienced the rupture firsthand; their son witnessed its long and indeterminate aftermath. This tectonic layering of medieval and Reformation belief – prone to destabilizing slips, sudden ruptures, and unexpected restorations of uncertain peace – undergirded the religious world of William Shakespeare.

In 1520, three treatises by the continental priest Martin Luther gave voice to a set of doctrines and attitudes that, although not exactly unprecedented (complaints against Rome and challenges to its authority and theologies were a staple of every Christian age since the first century of the

Common Era), still carried all the expressive force of the radically novel. Luther challenged the papacy's monopoly on the means of salvation in its sacramental practices and penitential requirements, making a deadly assault on the culture of traditional Catholicism with one extraordinary idea: that men and women were saved solely by their faith in God. The prayers, alms, pilgrimages, and invocations to saints that had for so long characterized the religious culture of western Christendom were now decried as vain, superstitious idolatry, affronts to the majesty and omnipotence of the Lord, meant only to enrich the coffers of a rapacious Church under the leadership of a venal, over-mighty papacy.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, the first English reformers (all of whom, it is important to note, had been trained as Roman Catholic priests), following Luther's line of reasoning, had abolished the Latin Mass and successfully challenged the validity of all but two sacraments, maintaining only Baptism and the Eucharist. They had ridiculed the veneration of saints as ignorant blasphemy. They had razed the twin edifices of purgatory and penance underpinning the doctrine that good works helped to save human souls. This was a thorough reformation of traditional belief, and it profoundly rearranged the lives of the ordinary people who, caring little for theological niceties, had found comfort in church ritual, the intercession of saints, and the notion that the souls of their dearly departed could be saved through their prayerful efforts.

But for the hottest of the reformers, even this strike to the very heart of English folk practice was not enough. The English Church had replaced its Latin Missal with an English-language Book of Common Prayer – which may have erased all mention of the pope but mandated a church service still oriented around the celebration of the Eucharist. It was thus duly (and colorfully) decried by "puritan" reformers, writing to the Parliament of 1572, as an "unperfect book, culled and picked out of that popish dunghill, the mass book full of all abominations" (reprinted in Cressy and Ferrell). In its pages, not only the orthodox formulas for the remaining sacraments of Baptism and Communion but also the rites of marriage, confirmation, extreme unction, and confession remained – desacralized yet formalized in print, and required by Elizabethan statute to be performed in the manner and words set out in the book.

Custom invariably attaches itself to ceremony. It is no wonder, then, that the more hotly dedicated of Luther's followers in early sixteenth-century England – and then of John Calvin's in the late sixteenth century – complained that the English people had been forced to plight their troths to a national church that was but "halfly-reformed." Most distressing may well have been the fact that a great many English people were in fact quite happy with the Church of England's hybrid and cautious character, half-reformations being either less spiritually unsettling or (as was the case with most ordinary folks) simply less

demanding. Standing fast on cases of conscience led only a very special few in this period to the stake or the scaffold, but the spectacle dampened radical ardor and left deep marks on England's collective spirit.

The state of religion / the religion of state in Shakespeare's time

By the time Shakespeare took up his pen in the late 1570s, a queen who inherited her throne from her Catholic sister in 1558, declaring herself and her kingdom now officially Protestant, had, in some respects, actually proven it. Her clerics now preached the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Her government had largely succeeded in removing "idolatrous" statues from English parish churches and whitewashing the evidence of once-radiant saints from their walls. Communion was to be offered on a movable table set in the midst of the congregation, instead of an altar permanently set at the east end of the church, the dedicated site of many a medieval miracle.

Elizabeth I, however, retained the gilt candlesticks on the altar of her personal chapel: telling, glistening reminders that what transpired on *her* table might remain worthy of devotion in the old style. What remained of the old-style Church likewise haunted its new incarnation. Protestant doctrine taught that the words of the priest could not effect a transformation wrought only by God, but the English Church never went so far as to endorse the theology associated with radical continental reform – that Communion merely recalled and honored the historic meal shared between Christ and his followers. The Eucharist, described in new doctrinal formulas and performed in the vernacular, remained the sacred centerpiece of English formal worship, and something more substantial than memorial graced English Communion tables every week. The *Real Presence* retained its state of philosophical reality, even as the fervid and earthy invocations of body and blood that had enthralled, mystified, and evangelized generations of laypeople were now ordered out of bounds and out of mind by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Such religious energy was bound to redirect, and so sacramental theology became the first deadly litmus test in the vertiginous churches of Henry VIII and his childless descendants. How a person understood the sacrament of the altar indicated what he or she thought about the sanctity of the priest, the necessity of his celibate state, and the salvific efficacy of his ministrations. If those understandings did not concur with those of the monarch, they also indicated what value a person placed on political obedience. All this understanding could lead to a governmental career, to the stake, or to both (in order of frequency). If you were a subject with a modicum of sense and a bent for self-preservation, your task was to gauge the decisions of the great and the good and determine – year to year, month to month, week to week – whether *your* soul was worth wagering on *their* whims. In any case, you were still

required to attend (or, in the case of clergy, preside over) the services of the Church of England, over which monarchs now reigned supreme, whether their personal brand of spirituality leaned toward Rome, Germany, Geneva, golden candlesticks, or simply mastery of an institution they viewed as central to their strategies of political governance.

Violent disputes over theology thus provided indelible public service announcements: a person could be reduced to ashes during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47, break with Rome 1532) or Mary I (1553–58) for denying the doctrine of transubstantiation, or burned to a crisp during Edward VI's (1547–53) for affirming it. In 1546, on trial during a traditionalist turn in the spiritual mood of King Henry VIII, the proto-Protestant Anne Askew was reported to have simply smiled to herself when asked if she had ever said, in front of witnesses, that the English Church taught that "a mouse eating the host received God." No doubt she had said exactly that, and with withering scorn; it was a common enough expression of contempt for the sacramental teaching of the Church now headed by a theologically mercurial king. In any case, the consequences held: Askew was duly racked and executed, allowing generations of Protestant chroniclers, including the great martyrologist John Foxe, to gift her with a kind of posthumous eloquence. They were safe to do so: within a year, with Edward VI enthroned, men and women went to the stake for believing in the very idea Askew had held in contempt – that the Communion host became true, carnal flesh after its priestly consecration and thus could be taken efficaciously by mice *and* men.

Catholic holdouts

Traditional English Catholicism was in decline by the end of the sixteenth century, but made up in fervency what it lost in sheer numbers. This was a matter of demographics as much as it was a matter of conversion or resistance. After the brief reign of the Catholic Mary Tudor (r.1552–58) failed to return England permanently to the papal faith, traditional belief faded along with the memories of a generation of believers, Shakespeare's father among them, who had all but died out by the beginning of the seventeenth century. Their ranks were then incompletely replaced, but by believers far more volatile and dangerous: converts evangelized by English Jesuits, continentally trained, whose return mission included teaching the art of equivocation (the clever subversion of oath taking, which allowed Catholics on trial to give false witness without imperiling their souls), the endorsement of recusancy (the refusal to attend church services mandated by law), and other forms of active resistance, even unto martyrdom, to what these new "foreign" priests considered unlawful Protestant authority.

The Protestants Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) and James I (r. 1603–25) thus preferred to hang, draw, and quarter Catholics for the crime of treason rather than incinerate them for the sin of heresy: secular punishment for a secular crime that signaled not only that the monarchical supremacy over the English Church had definitively replaced the supremacy once wielded by ecclesiastical authority but also that the English reformation had progressed to its next phase. By the end of the sixteenth century, few of its theologians bothered to condemn traditional interpretations of Communion; in all their bloody carnality, these ideas had become quaint. The English Church instead reopened the issue raised by Martin Luther in 1520: that salvation came by faith alone. By 1620, this new battle over the theological details of Christian justification had become venomously intramural, raging between Protestants in the Church of England, who disagreed on doctrines first articulated by Theodore Beza and John Calvin and then popularized by English successors such as William Perkins and a generation of preachers and bishops inspired by him.

Calvinist challenges

These new disputes centered on the doctrine of salvation. Was God's saving grace offered to all or only to a few, those John Calvin had called the "Elect"? And, once offered, was this saving grace a gift one could decline or even lose through unrepentant and obstinate sinfulness? In an age that barely remembered pilgrimage, almsgiving, and invocations, certain questions still remained: could a person do nothing at all to merit salvation? By the 1620s, the Calvinist wing of the Church of England, which held that the grace of God, unmerited and irresistible, had been given only to the Elect before the creation of the world, was fighting for its doctrinal life against a diversity of challengers, whose various distastes for Calvinism coalesced around their conviction that people should be taught that they could indeed fall from grace and thus must in some sense work, if not to earn then at least to keep, their salvation secure. These anti-Calvinists would soon dominate the episcopate; by 1629, their champion William Laud had secured both the ear of James's successor, Charles I, *and* the preeminent *cathedra* of Canterbury.

Laud and his supporters announced, from increasingly influential pulpits and episcopal sees, that they intended to restore the visual beauty and pageantry of prayer-book religion in England, deploring the "*de*formations" and whitewashings of what now appeared the energetically reforming governments of Edward and Elizabeth. Eucharistic theology was suddenly back on the table or, better said, off it, as these tables returned to the east end of churches and were once again decorated, railed, and made newly sacrosanct. Laudians claimed to be traditionalists, but once the recent past itself became time out of mind – in volatile times, memories are short – their work was nothing less than radical innovation, counter-revolution if not counter-reformation. Religious nostalgia, which once hearkened back to the days of traditional, saintly Catholic

England, now looked back to the days of Elizabeth, mourning the end of reforming Protestantism and warning of the return of popish idolatry and its insistence that salvation was indeed tied to the sacraments.

Three markedly diverse versions of English Christianity thus spanned William Shakespeare's writing life, during which members of the Church of England became Catholic heretics in 1530, Protestant heretics in 1552, and Catholic heretics in 1558; Catholic heresy became Catholic treason in 1584; medieval piety became a pious memory by 1603; and the triumphant Protestants in the Church of England had savagely turned on each other by the 1610s, undoing a theological consensus only forged sometime after 1580.

Religion and the English language

The reformations of the sixteenth century did spark one remarkable and cataclysmic change: no matter their theological persuasion, the English now believed in a God who understood the English language. When, in 1539, Henry VIII finally decided to follow the urgings of his forward-thinking clerics and order the Bible to be translated into English, printed in bulk, and a copy placed in every parish and cathedral church in the kingdom, he created the conditions (quite unwittingly: only a few years later, he tried to restrict the reading of scripture to men of learning and wealth) that finally allowed England its own singular version of the Renaissance, one that would flourish in words, on the page, in the pulpit, or on the stage, rather than in paint or marble – and would make a lasting impact on every subject in the realm thereafter.

By the end of the fourteenth century, before the age of print – or indeed of Bibles in any language other than the Latin of the Roman *ecclesia* or of any licit Bible translation except that of the fourth-century scholar Jerome – illicit manuscript versions of the vernacular Bible were already circulating in England. These translations were inspired by the radical priest John Wyclif, whose passionate conviction that Holy Writ should be expressed in the language of laypeople provoked the English authorities to make laws that expressly forbade the translation of scripture into the vernacular, thus making England the only country in western Christendom to have such laws on its books. The English government was pledged to root out heresy as a pestilence that could call forth God's (and the pope's) chastening hand. For its part, the Church could try but not execute heretics, so it was up to the state to put them to death.

And so it was that in 1429 the English Church authorities exhumed Wyclif's moldering corpse and consigned what was left of it to a purifying conflagration. It could not so easily extinguish the Bibles, or the remarkable hunger that they fed. English translations continued their secret dissemination, becoming in the process powerful evidence of the expressive aptitude of the English language.

The earliest Wycliffite scriptures, rendered word for word rather than thought for thought, were unwieldy in tone – so many holy crib sheets for translation practice – but they became suppler and pithier in subsequent redraftings. The preface to a second version (completed by Wyclif's secretary, John Purvey, in 1397) declares the intention to "translate after the sentence and not only after the words, so that the sentence be open, or opener, in English as Latin."

This determination to combine translation with cultural adaptation inspired William Tyndale to bypass the Vulgate altogether and instead consult the most authoritative Greek and Hebrew versions of the testaments available to humanist scholars at that time. These were not ancient, for the scriptures have no originals. In a way, then, Tyndale did not provide England with a more accurate Bible (at least not exactly: as can be said of all biblical translators in this period, he corrected and reedited the fourth-century version of Jerome, which undoubtedly had become corrupted over a millennium of hand-copied manuscripts). What he actually provided was a testament to the English language's capacity to voice the word of God.

God, however, could be obscure even in English, and so Tyndale also provided explanations of difficult passages, something he called "setting a light in the margent." His marginal theologizing, which made much of Luther and little of monarchical authority, led to his execution. (Unlike Wyclif, Tyndale went to his stake alive.) (See Figure 138.) But in 1536, the same year Tyndale was killed (for, in the words of Henry VIII's government, "the advancement and setting forth of Luther's abominable heresies"), another English Bible quietly appeared on the English scene, against which no legal measures were taken. The king was not averse to translation; as Supreme Head of the Church, however, he insisted on authorizing it.

Henry's "Great Bible" of 1539 was notable on several counts: for its retention of the pithy Anglo-Saxon phraseology of Wycliffite Bibles, for the locutions of Tyndale (whose poetic voice has resonated through every English-language Bible since), and, like Tyndale's Bible, for its being based not only on Greek and Hebrew scriptural texts but also on Latin and German translations dating from the same period. Perhaps most importantly, and surely indicative of the public nature of English religion in this age, this Bible was authorized by the king, whose picture graced its title page, which proclaimed that the word of God was a royal gift – a book intended for the Church to proclaim and explain, not open to private interpretation.

But Tyndale's marginal theologizing survived, at least in spirit, to grace the scriptures that Shakespeare would have known: the Geneva Bible of 1560, so-called because it was first compiled in that city during the reign of Mary I (under whose authority English Bibles and the translation of scripture were once again banned). As befitted an enterprise begun clandestinely, however, this Bible, much like the illicit scriptures of Tyndale and Wyclif, was designed for *unauthorized* reading: designed with pedagogy in