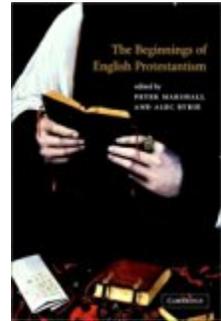


Peter Marshall, Alec Ryrie, eds. *The Beginnings of English Protestantism*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xii + 242 pp. \$30.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-00324-7; \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80274-1.

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Origins of the English Reformation

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Since the 1970s, two strikingly different versions of the English Reformation have been on offer. The traditional narrative postulates a widely hated Roman clerical tyranny undermined by Henry VIII, whose determination to divorce led to mostly conservative changes that unintentionally laid the basis for popular religious reformation. A revisionist alternative emerged in the 1970s positing a conscientious and beloved church overthrown by an alliance between a self-serving king and a cabal of dedicated Protestants whose radical reform from above triggered widespread but unsuccessful rebellions followed by decades of sullen acquiescence until a compromise was beaten out under Elizabeth. While the revisionist narrative currently carries the day in its broad outline, it has not yet filled in all the spaces. Focusing on outcomes, it has slighted the origins of the Reformation and in particular the important role of early reformers.

Marshall and Ryrie intend for this collection of essays, by a mix of junior and senior historians, “to redress the balance in recent historical writing by directing attention back to those critical early years of the Reformation under Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I, and to the establishment and growth of the movement that was to become English Protestantism” (p. 4). The authors address several themes: the medieval roots of religious reform; the role of Catholic influences in shaping Protestantism; the fluidity of confessional boundaries and their resistance to definition; the broader European context of

the English Reformation; and the complex and sometimes unpredictable interactions between religion and society.

Peter Marshall sets the stage in his opening essay with an acknowledgment of the complexities of defining those early “evangelical” converts who began the process of reformation in England. Despite those difficulties, he discerns in their careers a similar pattern: a particular catalyst—exposure to the scriptures in the vernacular, or to a notorious case of persecution, or to an influential mentor like Hugh Latimer—stimulated them to reexamine traditional church doctrine and ultimately reject it as false. Significantly, adds Richard Rex, many of those early converts came from the ranks of the friars (perhaps 10 percent of all friars converted in the 1530s), because their education, mastery of theological literature, administrative skills, and popularity among the laity proved crucial in advancing the cause of reformation.

But if a definition of early evangelicals (and Protestants, and even Catholics for that matter) is difficult to agree upon, so too are their numbers. How many were there, and how many followers did they attract? Alec Ryrie dismisses outright any expectation that religious loyalties can be susceptible to accurate quantification. Instead, he relies on certain “level-headed and circumstantial contemporary assessments” (i.e., anecdotal evidence [p. 91]), for his conclusion that it was evangelicalism’s promise of a “liberty” susceptible to liberal interpretation that had by 1553 won a determined minority of supporters who took advantage of controversy and confusion to

spread their beliefs. This is a clever argument, but its numerical vagueness is unsatisfying. Further complicating efforts at enumeration is the fact that not all converts remained converted. Thomas Freeman discusses schisms within the ranks of the converted, most particularly the Freewillers of the 1550s whose rejection of predestinarianism led them to break away from “orthodox” Protestant ranks, foreshadowing the infinite tendency of Protestantism to splinter.

As is now being more and more acknowledged, printing was crucial in the spread of Reformation ideas. Between them, Andrew Pettegree and John King’s chapters cover printing’s technical, religious, and social significance. Both use the radical London printer John Day to tie those issues together, arguing that his career illustrates the powerful influence that an ideologically committed, well-connected, and financially secure printer could assert in spreading new religious ideas.

Susan Wabuda, Ethan Shagan, and Patrick Collinson examine the range, often contradictory, of radical thought in the period. Wabuda examines the impact of the early Reformation on women, arguing that while it reinforced patriarchy, it also resulted in some (unintended) radicalizing consequences, such as justifying marital separation on the grounds of unreconcilable religious differences and encouraging the notion of spir-

itual (if not temporal) equality. Shagan, resurrecting the little-known theological writings of the minor “commonwealthman” Clement Armstrong, shows how radicals could reinterpret the royal supremacy, a theory normally favored by conservatives, to justify a radical reform of the institutional church resulting in the king exercising total moral surveillance over his subjects. Collinson, on the other hand, argues that during this time evangelicals, submitting to the words of Scripture describing the gathering together of two or three in Jesus’s name, increasingly came to believe that radical conventicles, not the institutional church, constituted the true body of Christ.

This collection offers some interesting new additions to a period of the English Reformation that has not yet been thoroughly studied. Marshall and Rex’s descriptions and definitions of early converts, Freeman’s discussion of the difficulties the converted faced in staying saved, Pettegree and King’s emphasis on the importance of printing, and Collinson’s description of the process by which conventicles turned into congregations acceptable to the institutional church are especially enlightening. Most of all, this volume demonstrates the degree to which English religion was in flux in the early sixteenth century, when change became the norm. The *Beginnings of English Protestantism* throws needed light on the crucial period of early Reformation history, but it also reveals how much more remains to be done.

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