Abstract

This paper contributes to the discussion about the formation of a distinctive Protestant culture in the reign of Elizabeth I. Protestant influence on culture was reflected in the suppression of Catholic religious drama, the creation of Protestant drama, and propagation of its tenets in ballads and other forms of media. While these forms of indoctrination were encouraged in the first decades of Elizabeth' s reign, a dramatic reversal of opinion erupted in the late 1570s. Puritanical authors censored plays and actors, even when scripture was recited, for as one author remonstrated: "it is not lawfull, to mixt scurrilitie with diuinitie." Specifically, this paper examines how the internalization of intensive Bible study may have affected attitudes towards plays in the last decades of the sixteenth century. A hyperliteralistic reading of the Bible seems to have led certain Protestant leaders to equate scripture with divinity, i.e., to link the printed or spoken word of the biblical text with the very person of God. Consequently, they were outraged when "ungodly" actors quoted scripture; only narrowly defined biblically based media were appropriate, while popular or secular motifs were castigated.

"To Print Them in Memory": Biblicism and Its Effects on Elizabethan Plays

By Curtis Bostick

While the long-standing question of whether the English Reformation should be categorized as "reformation from above" or "reformation from below" is still debated,[1] more recent studies have focused on the "process"[2] of religious change which began during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47) but was not completed until the seventeenth century, perhaps not until the 1660s when the Clarendon Code was implemented. Indeed, Patrick Collinson refers to a "second [English] Reformation" which began sometime around 1580 and was still unfinished well into the seventeenth century. This reformation marked a "cultural watershed" in English history, for it not only continued the profound break from the Catholic past, it also revealed a regressive and repressive strain in Protestantism with profound impact on the performance of plays, the composition of popular music, in short, on practically all popular forms of media, including pictorial representations.[3] In this paper, I elaborate on the effects of an internalization of Bible reading which contributed to this momentous cultural shift.

The dramatic reversal in Protestant opinion about plays and ballads and other forms of popular entertainment is readily documented. By the mid-1570s the traditional religious plays, those associated with major religious celebrations such as the feast of Corpus Christi, had been disbanded in York, Wakefield, and Chester. The last time these plays were performed in Coventry was 1579. It was about this same time that Protestant morality plays and interludes such as *The Life and Repentance of Marie Magdalene* and *The Disobedient Child* also were suppressed. These plays

were written and directed by reformist clerics, eager to condemn the faith of the papists, while attempting to inculcate Protestant doctrines such as salvation by faith alone. These plays were not without some racy and earthy dialogue, designed to entertain, as well as to instruct. Nonetheless, these plays were clearly Protestant in word and deed; yet they were suppressed as were the traditional plays. By the 1590s, city authorities banned the entrance of troupes of actors who performed these plays and other secular performances.[4]

Protestant reformers borrowed the popular melodies of the day and recast them with biblical lyrics or polemical attacks on the Mass or the anti-reformist clergy. "Virtually every successful Elizabethan ballad was immediately paid the compliment of a moralistic parody."[5] This tactic was widely practiced through the 1570s and early 1580s. One of the last great "hits" was "Green Sleeves," its melody adapted to some eighty ballads. But attitudes about composing psalms, hymns, and religious parodies to popular tunes changed dramatically. In 1597, a Kentish vicar sued his congregation for slander when they accused him of leading them in singing the twenty-fifth Psalm to "Green Sleeves." Shakespeare struck a responsive chord when the character Mistress Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* ridiculed Falstaff's words, which "do no more adhere and keep place together than the hundred Psalms to the tune of Green Sleeves."[6]

A number of factors have been adduced as to why Protestant social controllers grew increasingly intolerant of popular pastimes and other forms of entertainment; moreover, they were opposed especially to the association of religious motifs with cultural vehicles such as plays and ballads. Philip Stubbes, in his *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), railed against playwrights and actors reciting scriptures: "For . . . it is not lawfull, to mixt scurrilitie with diuinitie, nor diuinitie with scurrilitie."[7] The influence of John Calvin (who died in1564), who strictly interpreted the second commandment of the Decalogue so as not to permit any graphic representation of divinity, convicted many to equate "popular" with "profane" and denounce both. Other scholars have pointed to anti-theatrical attitudes in which the language, gestures, and movements of the actors were objected to on the grounds that they were "filthy," i.e., to say they induced men and women to lust or they corrupted especially the youth, or they were lies, devising a counterfeit reality. As Anthony Munday commented in his *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait From Plaies and Theaters* (1580), "Such doubtles is mine opinion of common plaies, vsual iesting, and riming ex tempore, that in a Christian-weal they are not sufferable. My reason is, because they are publike enimies to virtue, & religion; allurements vnto sinne, corrupters of good manners; the cause of securitie and carelesnes; meere brothel houses of Bauderie; and bring both the Gospel into slander; the Sabboth into contempt; mens soules into danger; and finalie the whole Commonweale into disorder."[8]

Sixteenth-century English Protestantism, as succinctly summed up by Christopher Haigh, was "the religion of the Word," both "the printed word and the preached word."[9] In contrast, late medieval Catholicism centered upon the Mass. Duffy is surely right: "The liturgy lay at the heart of medieval religion, and the Mass lay at the heart of the liturgy."[10] The celebration of the Mass was essentially a

"visual" phenomenon; that is, medieval communicants focused on the "sacring" when a priest consecrated the host, and, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation, the bread was miraculously transfigured into the very body of Christ. A bell was rung to draw attention to the act of sacring, lest parishioners absorbed in prayers or distracted by conversation missed observing the crucial moment.[11] Mimetic representation of religious truth was indispensable to late medieval Catholicism, ensuring that its manifestation was "intensely visual."[12]

Protestant propagandists relied on sermons and print-based media to disseminate instruction and knowledge. The foundational source for all sermons and printed material was the Bible. That is not to say that Catholic doctrine was not biblically founded; rather, the means by which religious instruction was inculcated were as divergent as print-based and graphic representations are inherently. The shift from the altar to the pulpit or page was revolutionary, extraordinary in its scope, and potentially dangerous.[13] Thomas Cranmer, the chief engineer of the Edwardian reform, devised a liturgy and worship service in which "the Bible and the pattern of life that it describes are omnipresent."[14] In 1559 Queen Elizabeth and her councillors persuaded Parliament to re-institute the second version of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* (1552) as the official guide for the liturgy and Communion service for all churches in England.[15] This book has been praised as "a masterpiece of theological engineering"[16] and "the greatest single achievement of Edward's reign."[17] The English worship service was remarkable for several reasons, among them the very "active part the congregation played."[18] The laity participated significantly more in Prayer Book services than in either Catholic or Calvinist churches on the continent.[19] Through the course of a year, they would read or hear practically all the Psalms, most of the New Testament, and a good deal of the Old Testament in their native tongue. Considering the extensive amount of lay participation, the uniformity of the liturgy, and the fact that it was all pronounced in English, surely few other components of the Reformation in England had a more profound effect than the Prayer Book.[20]

In conjunction with the official liturgy, Cranmer edited a set of twelve sermons to be read in England's churches.[21] These sermons comprised the first book of sermons authorized by Elizabeth's government in 1559; a second set was published in 1563, to which was added in 1571 "an Homily against disobedience and willful rebellion." By 1582 the two volumes were printed uniformly and bound together.[22]

"[D]uety towards GOD, their Prince, and their neighbors," as stated in the Preface, must be learned by the people through the preaching of "the word of GOD, which is the onely foode of the soule."[23] Recognizing that not all ministers have been adequately trained to instruct the people, the Preface further states that the queen, in consultation with her councilors, has reissued this "Booke of Homilies," first printed by King Edward VI, "her most loving brother, a Prince of most worthy memory." The queen commands that all parsons, vicars, curates, and others having spiritual responsibilities read the following sermons in sequence for the appropriate Sunday and holy day as indicated in the Prayer Book.[24]

The homilies were a masterful medium; they avoided theological jargon, sparingly cited classical authors, and were purposely written with clarity and succinctness so that they could be recited repeatedly and not wear on parishioners' ears. Sermons were adroitly divided with the intent that the first volume could be read in a month's time.[25] They exemplify the whole gamut of concerns under the rubric of social disciplining. As one would expect, there are sermons on purely religious and doctrinal issues such as faith, charitable practices, and good works.[26] There are also sermons on appropriate attire and admonitions against swearing and cursing, "gluttony and drunkenesse," "whoredome," and "Contention and Brawling."[27] Most interesting in the context of this paper is the first sermon: "A Frvitfvll Exhortation to the reading and knowledge of holy *Scripture.*"

From its opening sentence the primacy of the Bible in the new reformed faith is impressed: "Vnto a Christian man there can bee nothing either more necessarie or profitable, then the knowledge of holy scripture," once again called "the foode of the soule." No longer should anyone "runne to the sinking puddles of mens traditions (devised by mens imagination) for our iustification and saluation." For "there is no trueth nor doctrine necessarie for our iustification and euerlasting saluation, but that is (or maybee) drawne out of that fountaine and well of trueth," the Bible. It is essential that everyone, clergy and laymen alike, diligently devote themselves to Bible study: "Therefore as many as bee desirous to enter into the right and perfect way vnto GOD, must applie their mindes to know holy Scripture, without the which, they can neither sufficiently know GOD and his will, neither their office and duty."[28]

For the purposes of this discussion, three points are of special interst: (1) how one is to access biblical knowledge according to Cranmer;[29] (2) who is expected to gain such knowledge, and (3) the level of the knowledge to be acquired. The first point is clarified by Cranmer's repeated phrase "heare and read" scripture.[30] While Cranmer in one passage prefers a complementary approach to Bible study,[31] the overall sense obtained is that he makes no crucial distinction between hearing and reading because the primary pedagogical organ is not the eyes or ears, but rather the heart.[32] Concerning point two, it seems that Cranmer expects everyone to have access to the scriptures and to have the ability to gain an appropriate level of understanding, regardless of age or social rank.[33] He rejects the argument that some will fall into the error owing to their lack of expertise to read the Bible or that only the clergy or "learned men" are qualified to read it.[34] Cranmer responds that everyone must begin reading God's word to dispel their ignorance. Moreover, they can not allow the fear of misinterpretation to overcome them, for by implication no one would try to grow crops or delve into business for fear of failure "and neuer to take in hand to doe any manner of good thing, lest peradventure some evill thing may chance therof."[35] Others excuse themselves, claiming that scripture is simply too 'hard' to understand. Cranmer admits that some passages are difficult to comprehend; nevertheless,

> GOD receiueth the learned and vnlearned, and casteth away none, but is indifferent vnto all. And the Scripture is full, as well

> of low valleys, plaine wayes, and easie for euery man to use, and to walke in. . . . And whosoeuer giueth his mind to holy Scripture, with diligent study and burning desire, it cannot bee ... that hee should bee left without helpe.[36]

As to the level of knowledge to which one ought to aspire, Cranmer is not interested in volume, but in depth: "And in reading of GODS word, hee most profiteth not alwayes, that is most ready in turning of the booke, or in saying of it without the book, but hee that is most turned into it, that is most inspired with the holy Ghost, most in his heart and life altered and changed into that thing which hee readeth."[37] His most repeated expression as to how one should internalize scripture is "to print" it on one's heart or in one's memory.[38] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the verb "print" has several meanings, including a figurative usage: "2. b. To impress (an image, thought, saying, etc.) upon the heart, mind, or memory: to fix in the mind." An example of this usage is given from one of the other homilies in this set, the one on matrimony (1563): "This sentence is very meet for women to print in their remembrance." It is surely this sense of the word which Cranmer intends. What is striking about his use of this word is that it is always connected with the act of reading: "This word, whosoeuer is diligent to read, and in his heart to print that he readeth"; and again, "For that thing, which (by continuall vse of reading of holy Scripture, and diligent searching of the same) is deepely printed and grauen in the heart, at length turneth almost into nature."[39]

How does one imprint or engrave the word of God onto the heart? Not by following the path of late medieval mysticism or waiting upon illumination from the Spirit, but, rather, one reads and reads until one gets it right:

> If wee reade once, twice, or thrice, and vnderstand not, let us not cease so, but still continue reading, praying, asking of other, and so by still knocking (at the last) the doore shall be opened. . . . Although many things in the Scripture be spoken in obscure mysteries, yet there is nothing spoken vnder darke mysteries in one place, but the selfe same thing in other places, is spoken more familiarly and plainly, to the capacity both of learned and vnlearned.[40]

Repetitive and intense Bible reading seems to have formed a hyper-literalistic view of scripture in the aforementioned works of Philip Stubbes and his contemporary and comrade-in-arms against plays, Anthony Munday. In Stubbes's lengthy catalogue of sins and damnable practices in Elizabethan England, he contends that,

> In the first of Ihon we are taught, that the word is GOD, and God is the word. Wherefore, who soeuer abuseth this word of our God on stages in playes and enterluds, abuseth the Maiesty of GOD in the same, maketh a mocking stock of him, & purchaseth to himself, eternal damnation.[41]

While it seems abundantly clear from the context of this biblical passage that Christ is the "word of God" to which John refers, Stubbes has interpreted this

passage to indicate that scripture is to be identified with God himself. Indeed, Stubbes claimed that actors not only corrupt their audiences by mixing scripture with play dialogue; they insult God directly, personally.[42] His outrage at playwrights and actors is more understandable when one recognizes that, according to Stubbes, these men are not merely irreligious, but blasphemous. Munday concurs:

> The reuerend word of God, & histories of the Bible set forth on the stage by these blasphemous plaiers, are so corrupted with their gestures of scurrilitie, and so interlaced with vncleane, and whorish speeches, that it is not possible to drawe anie profite out of the doctrine of their spiritual moralities. . . . And of al abuses this is most vndecent and intolerable, to suffer holie things to be handled by men so prophane, and defiled by interposition of dissolute words.[43]

Stubbes's equation of scripture with God may have been a possible outcome of the kind of Bible study advocated by Cranmer. That is not to say that Cranmer would have endorsed Stubbes's diatribe against plays; Cranmer's generation of reformers embraced playwriting as a means to broadcast their message. Rather, it is conceivable that such intense Bible study as to make the printed word embossed on one's heart would foster a mentality that only "printable" information was suitable, "printable," defined narrowly as "biblical" or "scriptural."[44] All incoming data would have to be filtered through this confessional sieve.

This kind of biblicism severely constricted the means of transmission, for Protestant ministers in the last decades of the sixteenth century were fixated on just two, auditory and textual. Other avenues, namely visual, were rejected and condemned. While decrying the scurrilous speech of actors, Munday warns his readers not to watch even their gestures and movements: "There commeth much euil in at the eares, but more at the eies, by these two open windowes death breaketh into the soule. Nothing entereth in more effectualie into the memorie, than that which commeth by seeing."[45] Eschewing popular ballads, shutting down plays, and attempting to suppress any "unscriptural" human behavior, Protestant reformers towards the end of Elizabeth's reign severely limited their access and appeal to intended audiences. One can well imagine the protests recorded by Munday that,

> Tel manie of these men of the Scripture, they wil scof, and turne it vnto a iest. Rebuke them for breaking the Sabboth day, they wil saie, you are a man of the Sabboth, you are verie precise, you wil allowe vs nothing; you wil haue nothing but the worde of God; you wil permit vs no recreation, but haue men like Asses, who neuer rest but when they are eating.[46]

Puritans and reformist Anglicans were not content simply to save sinners from eternal damnation; their goal was much higher. The Sheffield pastor, Nicholas Bownd, challenged his readers and, no doubt, his parishioners. Sermons and especially Bible study were intended "to make perfect in us faith."[47] To accomplish

this feat, Bownd, Stubbes, and other like-minded enthusiasts determined that an extraordinary level of commitment was necessary. By the 1580s Protestantism was no longer the religion of protest, of novelty, of youth and iconoclasm;[48] instead, it became a religion much narrower and restrictive in its acceptance of forms of media, while it demanded an ever more severe code of ethics. Later Elizabethan Protestant leaders permitted no admixture of popular music or dramatic accompaniment; the "word" alone was deemed sufficient. Their biblicism helped form a constrictive and antagonistic religious mentality even as the career of England's greatest writer was about to unfold.

Notes

1. Eamon Duffy re-opened this debate with his amply documented argument that late medieval and sixteenth-century Catholicism satisfied the religious needs of most English people; see *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

2. See Eric Josef Carlson, "Cassandra Banished: New Research in Tudor and Early Stuart England," and Diane Willen, "Revisionism Revived," in *Religion and the English People, 1500-1640, New Voices, New Perspectives,* ed. Eric Josef Carlson, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 45 (Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998), 6, 22, 288, 294.

3. See *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia: the Cultural Impact of the Second English Reformation,* the Stenton Lecture 1985 (Reading: University of Reading Press, 1986) 4, 8.

4. See Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia,* 9-11.

5. See Patrick Collinson, "Protestant Culture and the Cultural Revolution," in Margo Todd, *Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England,* Rewriting Histories Series, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 42.

6. Collinson, "Protestant Culture," 42.

7. From a facsimile edition, preface by Arthur Freeman (New York and London: Garland Publisher, 1973), L.v.v. Stubbes' remarks are also cited by Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia,* 13.

8. From a facsimile edition, preface by Arthur Freeman (New York and London: Garland Publisher, 1973), 43-44.

9. "The Recent Historiography of the English Reformation," *The Historical Journal* 25 (1982): 995-1007; 999. Cf. The editors' comment that the Bible constituted "the supreme authority for belief and life" in "Introduction," *Cartwrightiana,* ed. Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson (London: Allen and Unwin Publishers, 1951), 17.

10. Duffy, 91.

11. Duffy, 97.

12. See Collinson, "Protestant Culture and the Cultural Revolution," 37.

13. See John N. King, *English Reformation Literature: The Tudor Origins of the Protestant Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 126-32.

14. King, 126.

15. For a detailed study on this most significant development, see Norman Jones, *Faith by Statute. Parliament and the Settlement of Religion, 1559,* Royal Historical Society, Studies in History, 32 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1982).

16. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547 – 1603,* 2nd ed. British History in Perspective Series (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Publishers, 2001), 30.

17. Penry Williams, *The Later Tudors: England, 1547-1603* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 76. G.R. Elton praised it as a "beautiful liturgy;" see *England Under the Tudors,* 2nd ed. (London and New York: Methuen, 1974), 212.

18. See Sharon L. Arnoult, "'Spiritual and Sacred Publique Actions.' The *Book of Common Prayer* in the Understanding of Worship in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church of England," in *Religion and the English People, 1500 – 1640, New Voices, New Perspectives,* 25-47; 28.

19. In reformed churches, the minister alone spoke all prayers and confessions, while the congregation remained silent except when singing psalms. Moreover, until 1571 in the English worship service, outside of preaching and administering the sacrament, a lay person could conduct all other parts of the service. See Arnoult, *"Book of Common Prayer* and Worship," 34, 38.

20. See Judith Maltby, *Prayer Book and People: Religious Conformity before the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4-5.

21. Cranmer wrote four of these sermons; the others were written by John Harpesfield, the author of the sermon on the misery of the human condition, Thomas Becon, and Bishop Edmund Bonner of London; see Diarmaid MacCullcoh, *Thomas Cranmer, a Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 372-73.

22. The second set originally contained twenty-one sermons counted as twenty, for the two sermons for Good Friday were under one heading. The authorship of the second volume of sermons is unclear, although Bishops Jewell, Grindal, Pilkington, and Parker were most likely authors. The modern editors of this work indicate that Elizabeth added her hand in revisions. See *Certaine Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth I, (1547-1571),* A Facsimile Reproduction of the Edition of 1623 with an Introduction by Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1968), vi-vii.

23. *Certaine Sermons,* a2; pagination is cited according to the facsimile.

24. *Certaine Sermons,* a[3].

25. MacCulloch, *Cranmer,* 374.

26. Sermons 4 through 6 in Book One.

27. Sermon 6 in Book Two, sermon 7 in Book One, sermon 5 in Book Two, sermon 11 in Book One and 12 in Book One respectively.

28. *Certaine Sermons,* 1-2.

29. There is such similarity in expression between the preface, known to have been written by Cranmer, and this first sermon, that it seems most likely that he was the author of both.

30. See *Certaine Sermons,* 1 ff.

31 "I say not nay, but a man may prosper with only hearing, but hee may much more prosper, with both hearing and reading." *Certaine Sermons,* 5.

32. "These Bookes therefore ought to bee much in our hands, in our eyes, in our eares, in our mouthes, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of GOD is the heavenly meat of our soules." *Certaine Sermons,* 2.

33. "There is (sayth Fulgentius) abundantly enough , both for men to eat, and children to sucke. There is, whatsoeuer is meet for all ages, and for all degrees and sorts of men." *Certaine Sermons,* 2. A marginal note on the left reads: "Holy Scripture ministreth sufficient doctrine for all degrees and ages. *Matth* 4. *Luke* 3, *Iohn* 17. *Psal.* 19"

34. "Some goe about to excuse them by their owne frailenesse and fearefulnesse, saying that they dare not reade holy Scripture, least through their ignorance, they should fall into any errour. Other pretend that the difficulty to understand it, and thet, [har]dnesse thereof is so great, that it is meet to be read only of Clarkes and learned men. As touching the first: Ignorance of GODS word, is the cause of all errour, as Christ himselfe affirmed to the Saduces ..." *Certaine Sermons,* 4; The text has about three spaces missing; however; it is clear from the discussion on the following page that the word "hardnesse" is clearly intended.

35, *Certaine Sermons,* 5

36. *Certaine Sermons;* every man is responsible to know and act upon certain fundamental doctrines: "And those things in the Scripture that be plaine to vnderstand, and necessary for saluation, euery mens duty is to learne them, to print them in memory, and effectually to exercise them." *Certaine Sermons,* 6.

37. *Certaine Sermons,* 3.

38. *Certaine Sermons,* twice on p. 3 and once on p. 6; see fn. 36.

39. *Certaine Sermons,* 3.

40. *Certaine Sermons,* 6.

41. This passage concludes: "And no marueil, for the sacred word of GOD, and God himselfe, is neuer to be thought of, or once named, but with great feare, reuerence and obedience to the same." *Anatomie of Abuses,* L.v.^{v}.

42. "[B]eware therefore you masking Players, you painted sepulchers, you doble dealing embodexters ... abuse God no more, corrupt his people no longer with your degrees, and intermingle not his blessed word with such prophane vanities." L.v.^{v}–[vi].

43. *A Second and Third Blast,* 103-4.

44. Not just any kind of printed material was acceptable. Stubbes cautions his readers that "For as corrupt meates doo annoy the stomack, and infect the body, so the reading of wicked and ungodly Bookes (which are to the minde, as meat is to the body) infect the soule, and corrupt ye minde, hailing it to distruction: if the great mercy of God be not present." *Anatomie of Abuses,* P.[vii].

45. *A Second and Third Blast,* 95-96.

46. *A Second and Third Blast,* 90-91.

47. *Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti: Or the True Doctrine of the Sabbath*

.. *laid forth* (London, 1606) as cited in *The Blue Banner* 9 (January – March 2000), 28.

48. Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobis,* 4.

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