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The Commemoration of the Reformation and Mid-Nineteenth-Century

Evangelical Identity

By John Wolffe

On 21 May 1827 the ‘British Society for Promoting the Religious Principles of the Reformation’ [hereafter Reformation Society] was formally constituted at a public meeting at Freemasons’ Hall in London. Implicit in the Society’s initial statement of its objects were two revealing assumptions. First the nature of the ‘religious principles of the Reformation’ was deemed to be unproblematic and axiomatic: they could be promoted without any need for debate or even definition of what they were. Second, the Reformation was seen not as a distant historical event, but as an ongoing contemporary process. Among the Society’s objects was ‘To collect and circulate authentic intelligence regarding the progress of the Reformation’, having particular reference to its operations in Ireland.¹ The militant Anglican evangelical founders of the Society thus saw themselves as straightforwardly standing in a direct tradition stemming from the sixteenth century Reformers, whose incomplete work they aspired to finish by securing the conversion of Ireland to Protestantism.

The first of these assumptions looks startling to early twenty-first century historians. Moreover within a few years of 1827 both the advent of the Oxford Movement and the resurgence of Roman Catholicism in both Ireland and Britain were causing evangelicals themselves to think much more closely about the nature of the Reformation and its implications for their own day. This process was crystallized particularly by the tercentenary of the publication of Coverdale’s English Bible in 1835. Moreover other contemporary events appeared to confirm the second assumption of 1827: that the Reformation was an ongoing, incomplete process, or

even one that now needed to be repeated in the light of the current state of church and nation.

Although generalized veneration for the Reformation was widespread among late eighteenth and early nineteenth century evangelicals, in the 1830s there was substantially increased explicit attention to the sixteenth century as a source of inspiration for contemporary believers. This growth of interest in the early Victorian period has significant implications for present-day historians who continue to debate the origins and identity of evangelicalism, variously maintaining either its distinctiveness or its essential continuity with the Reformation and Puritan eras.² In particular Ian Shaw has recently used an account of the perceptions of nineteenth-century evangelical observers to support the continuity side of the argument,³ but it is important to consider how far their analysis was shaped by the circumstances of their own time as much as by objective assessment of the historical record. It will be argued here that a consciousness of intense *contemporary* struggle initially with Roman Catholicism and subsequently also with Anglo-Catholicism led nineteenth-century evangelicals to a much closer and more polemical identification with the Reformation than their eighteenth-century predecessors, who had perceived their primary struggle to be with religious indifference rather than with Rome.⁴

William Wilberforce's *Practical View*, published in 1797, and a seminal Anglican evangelical text, is notable for its lack of attention to the Reformation. Indeed the word 'reformation' itself is used in the book to refer to personal and corporate spiritual and moral renewal rather than to an historical era. Although Wilberforce referred at one point to 'the religion of the most eminent reformers' and equated it with 'true Christianity', he anticipated that his readers would lack 'time, opportunity or inclination' to peruse their writings. He appeared to regard them as

supporting witnesses rather than primary sources of inspiration and legitimacy.⁵ Wilberforce's original text thus contrasts strikingly with an introductory essay by Daniel Wilson, vicar of Islington and future bishop of Calcutta, added to an 1826 edition of the book. Wilson emphatically looked back to the 'glorious period of the Reformation' and hoped for 'the pure evangelical doctrines of the Reformation' to be 'more decidedly espoused' by contemporary bishops and church dignitaries.⁶

Developments in Ireland provided the crucial initial stimulus both for the formation of the Reformation Society and the wider growth of evangelical interest in the Reformation as a resource for polemic against contemporary Roman Catholicism. Efforts to educate and evangelize the Irish Roman Catholic peasantry had been gathering momentum since the Union of 1800, but more especially since 1822 when William Magee in his primary visitation charge as Archbishop of Dublin had called the clergy of the Church of Ireland to united efforts to secure the conformity of both Protestant Dissenters and Roman Catholics.⁷ In 1825, in evidence to a parliamentary committee, Magee insisted that it was realistic for the Church of Ireland to seek to gain the adherence of the majority of the population, but acknowledged that 'with respect to Ireland, the Reformation may, strictly speaking, be truly said only now to have begun.'⁸ Magee was a High Churchman, but for that very reason his encouragement gave enhanced legitimacy to the efforts of evangelicals.

In the autumn of 1826 there were widely publicised reports from Lord Farnham's estates in County Cavan of numerous former Roman Catholics conforming to the Church of Ireland. By January 1827 Farnham was claiming over 450 converts in Cavan, and by April, with the movement spreading more widely across the country, 1,340 conversions were reported.⁹ For a few months in late 1826 and early 1827 it seemed possible to believe that a full-scale belated Irish Reformation was now under

way. The formation of the Reformation Society in London was a product of this transient mood of Protestant euphoria. In the context of Ireland in May 1827 ‘Reformation’ meant simply the renunciation of Roman Catholicism and conformity to a Protestant Church, usually the Church of Ireland.

In the event, however, the formation of the Reformation Society marked not the dawn of a mass conversion of Ireland to Protestantism, but rather the high noon of a much more limited movement, which lost momentum in late 1827 and declined rapidly in the face political polarization of the country in the wake of Daniel O’Connell’s victory at the Clare election in the summer of 1828.¹⁰ Meanwhile in London, the Society’s promoters perceived a need for extended public statement of their religious objections to Roman Catholicism. Hence in late 1827 and early 1828 a series of lectures was delivered at Tavistock Chapel in Drury Lane, with the speakers including many of the Society’s leading clerical supporters.¹¹ In the present context, however, the striking feature of these lectures is how little the speakers had to say about the Reformation: their appeal rather was to Scripture and antiquity. As George Mutter, minister of Broadway Church, Westminster, put it:

... by the religion of Protestants, I do not understand the doctrine of Luther, or Calvin, or Melancthon, nor the Confession of Augsburg, or Geneva, nor the Catechism of Heidelberg, nor the Articles of the Church of England, no, not the harmony of the Protestant Confessions, but that wherein they all agree, and which they all subscribe with a greater harmony, as a perfect rule of faith and action, that is, THE BIBLE.

He noted that even Roman Catholic scholars acknowledged that there had been a Christian church in Britain from the earliest times. Hence he maintained that the ‘Church of Rome is not, therefore, our mother church, but a sister only, and that a younger sister’.¹² Accordingly, the lectures focused not on the Protestant Reformers, but rather on the doctrinal statements of the Council of Trent, with a view to demonstrating that they were innovations at variance with Scripture, and that the

post-Tridentine Church of Rome was a ‘novel Church ... essentially different from that ancient Church of Rome to which St Paul wrote his Epistle’.¹³

At this date specific evangelical references to the Reformation tended to be more emotive than historically informed. For example, in 1829 the Rev. Disney Robinson published his own appeal on behalf of the Reformation Society, denouncing perceived Protestant indifference to the state of Ireland and to Roman Catholic ‘aggression’ in England, which he saw as ‘ingratitude to our zealous forefathers’. He continued: ‘What do we not owe to those martyrs and reformers, who, in the hand of God, were the honoured instruments of obtaining for us that pure form of worship, which we now enjoy, without the fear of flames or the sword, with persecution, and without disgrace?’¹⁴

For their part, Roman Catholic opponents sought to exploit the ambiguities of the Reformation legacy, especially in responding to claims that the teachings of their church were unscriptural. Thus when in February 1828 the Reformation Society proposed to form a branch to coordinate its work among the numerous Irish migrants in the St Giles area of London, the Revd Mr Spooner, a Catholic priest, spoke up to claim that the principles of his own church were firmly based on Scripture, and that he himself had been converted from Protestantism as a result of reading the Bible. Subsequently he proposed a motion ‘That any attempt to make proselytes of the Roman Catholics of St Giles, and its vicinity, is not only inexpedient, but also a direct and positive invasion of that right of private judgement which forms the fundamental principle of the Protestant Reformation.’¹⁵ Similarly at a Reformation Society meeting in Bristol in August 1828, another priest, Francis Edgeworth, argued that the Bible could be interpreted in many different ways and highlighted differences between his Anglican and Nonconformist opponents. In response, the Society’s

leading orator, James Edward Gordon, delivered his stock denunciation of the mass, purgatory and the invocation of saints. However, from the Catholic side, Thomas McDonnell pointed out that Gordon's polemic evaded the question of what 'the principles of the Reformation' actually were, and mischievously observed that Unitarians as well as orthodox Protestants deferred to the Bible as their primary rule of faith.¹⁶

The sequel to these skirmishes was a series of lengthy set piece debates between Protestant and Roman Catholic speakers. The format had already been established by similar events in Ireland, for example a six-day discussion at Downpatrick in April 1828.¹⁷ Notable debates in England occurred at Liverpool in June, October and November 1830, Cheltenham in August and September 1830, Downside Abbey near Bath in March 1834, and Hammersmith in spring 1839.¹⁸ As in the 1827-8 series of lectures, however, the Reformation Society's speakers had little specific to say about the Reformation, with Protestant organizers and speakers endeavouring to keep their opponents firmly on the defensive. At Downpatrick, the leading Protestant advocate, the Revd R.W. Kyle, had acknowledged at the outset that his object was not to defend Luther's teaching as such, but rather to assert that 'he fulfilled his duty as a Christian and an honest man, in coming out from that apostate communion'.¹⁹ At Liverpool the Roman Catholic speaker, M.J. Falvey, a layman, took the offensive by highlighting the divided and fluid nature of the Reformation and attacking Luther's character, but rather than answering these charges his Protestant opponent, William Dalton, counter-attacked with further anti-Roman arguments.²⁰ At the beginning of the Downside Discussion, Edward Tottenham merely used the statements of the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Westminster Confession on the authoritative status of Scripture, as a basis for his claim that 'the Protestant rule ... is

simply the BIBLE ALONE'. His subsequent arguments were drawn purely from the text of Scripture without further reference to the Reformers.²¹ Preaching to the Reformation Society itself a few months later, Tottenham was anxious to direct his hearers' attention 'to the necessity of exertion and activity in reference to those very subjects which our Reformers maintained amid danger and persecution and death.'²² However after this rhetorical flourish he made no attempt to link his own polemics against the Church of Rome back to those of the sixteenth century: the equation between the two was merely implicitly assumed.

During the early 1830s, the prospects for Protestantism in Ireland appeared ever gloomier. Not only had the bright hopes of large-scale 'Reformation' been dashed, but the Whig government's 1833 reforms of the Church of Ireland, including the amalgamation of numerous bishoprics, implied acceptance that it would indefinitely remain a minority church. Evangelical Anglican reaction, as represented by the *Record* newspaper, was thus very similar to that of John Keble in his famous denunciation of the measure as 'national apostasy'.²³ Continued Whig attacks on the Church of Ireland, notably Lord John Russell's proposal to appropriate its surplus revenues for secular purposes, in 1834 and 1835 gave rise to extensive Protestant demonstrations on both sides of the Irish Sea.²⁴

These developments were the backdrop not only to the political crises of 1834-5 but to a proposal to mark the tercentenary of the English Reformation. A few weeks after the fall of Sir Robert Peel's Conservative administration in early April 1835, the Tory *Standard* newspaper remarked adversely on the absence hitherto of any commemoration in England. In response Thomas Hartwell Horne (**Plate 1: Horne image here?**), Rector of St Nicholas Acons Lombard Street and author of the influential *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*

(1818), explained that the English Reformation had been a process rather than a single event, and hence it was by no means clear when it should most appropriately be commemorated. He proposed, however, that the tercentenary be marked on the subsequent 4 October, the exact anniversary of the publication of Miles Coverdale's English translation of the Bible in 1535, which also conveniently happened to be a Sunday. He saw the occasion as one for 'devout gratitude' and also as an opportunity to pre-empt the efforts of 'the advocates of Popery' 'to pervert unwary Protestants from their pure and holy faith'. Horne's letter was widely reprinted in provincial newspapers and evangelical magazines.²⁵ His intervention was thus important in steering the commemorative impulse towards highlighting the Reformers' promotion of the vernacular Bible, a focus that appealed to both Anglican and Nonconformist evangelicals, rather than towards the political dimensions of Henry VIII's break with Rome and assertion of the independence of the English church. In July Thomas Burgess, the Bishop of Salisbury, an orthodox High Churchman with evangelical affinities, urged his clergy also to celebrate 20 March, as the anniversary of the passing in 1534 of the Act of Supremacy which 'completed our emancipation by law from the foreign supremacy of the Pope'.²⁶ However, with this actual tercentenary already past, Burgess's suggestion does not appear to have been acted on by clergy, whether in his own diocese or elsewhere, whereas Horne's proposal gathered momentum.

In August Horne published an expanded version of his letter as a substantial pamphlet, which he summarized as a combination of

... a brief Historical Sketch of the Reformation, on the Continent as well as in this country, together with a concise vindication of the religion of ALL ORTHODOX PROTESTANT CHURCHES from the unfounded charge of novelty brought against it and them by Romanists, from the reign of Queen Elizabeth down to the present time; and which should also exhibit the peculiar tenets of Romanism, in contrast with the pure Scriptures of Truth.²⁷

Although Horne's historical survey was hardly objective it was lucid, well-informed and clearly distinguished from the more theological element, contained in a model sermon which based its case for the antiquity of Protestantism on its consistency with Scripture rather than on claims for the ancient origins of the British/English church. The declared purpose of the pamphlet was to provide an accessible resource to inform the commemoration, especially for clergy preparing sermons for 4 October. It was widely circulated and reprinted: a single bookseller in Islington reported that he had sold eighty copies in three weeks, and by the following year it had already reached its seventh edition.²⁸ The Dissenter Thomas Timpson produced a similar short historical survey, aimed particularly at Sunday scholars.²⁹

During September there was mounting interest in the commemoration, which was by no means limited to the Church of England. The London Independent ministers and the President of the Wesleyan Conference sent circulars to their respective constituencies and urged them to participate.³⁰ The movement extended to the most distant parts of England: from Truro a traveller forwarded to *The Times* a notice jointly signed by the Anglican, Baptist, Independent, New Connexion and Wesleyan ministers of the town calling on their congregations to 'join in returning their public thanks to Almighty God' on 4 October.³¹

However some divergences of perception regarding its purpose and focus were indicated by suggestions about the causes that might be supported by church collections on 4 October. Some favoured very specifically Protestant causes such as the Reformation Society or assistance for Church of Ireland clergy suffering hardship as a result of uncollected tithes; another correspondent advocated raising money for churchbuilding.³² While an anonymous Islington layman supported Horne by arguing that the commemoration should be conducted in a 'specially religious manner',³³

others saw the opportunity to build up political capital in defence of the Irish Church and in opposition to the Whig government. In commending Horne's pamphlet to its readers *The Times* observed that 'The people must exert themselves, or O'Connell, whose slaves the Ministers are, will be their master too.'³⁴

Nevertheless, although specific motives varied, there was widespread enthusiastic observance of the tercentenary, across a denominational spectrum from orthodox High Churchmen through evangelical Anglicans, Independents and Wesleyans to Unitarians. Numerous sermons were preached and a significant cross-section published. There were reports of enlarged congregations, and of interdenominational Protestant solidarity. The tercentenary was also observed in Scotland and by Irish Protestants.³⁵

John Hambleton's sermon at the chapel of ease in Islington can be taken as a representative example of the Anglican evangelical response to the commemoration. Taking Revelation 14:6 as his text Hambleton asserted that the Bible, which contained the Gospel, 'the good tidings of man's salvation', was the solid base of Protestantism, in contrast to the Romanist reliance on tradition. He defined the Gospel as 'that whoever will come to God by this new and living way ... through Christ, may have remission of sins', and continued: 'Shame that at the Reformation, any should have framed from it a term of reproach for the Gospellers, as they called them. Shame for our age, if any can so use another form of the same word, and speak of evangelical religion, that is of the religion of the Gospel, with scorn and contempt.'³⁶ The Reformers, Hambleton asserted, had laboured to make the Gospel known to the 'perishing people at home' and to extend it throughout Europe. Gratitude for the Bible and the Reformation would be best demonstrated by support for mission overseas, implicit in the Reformers' vision although not practicable in the circumstances of their

own times, and in Ireland, ‘where Protestantism is pressed down, opposed and persecuted even unto death’.³⁷

Other Anglican evangelical and Wesleyan sermons might differ in their emphasis and specific selection of material. Thus Thomas Davis, then curate of All Saints Worcester and later Vicar of Roundhay, focused on attacking the Church of Rome, on the grounds that it ‘opposes the free course of the Gospel, by *obstructing the free course of the Bible*.’³⁸ W.M. Kinsey, preaching at St John’s Cheltenham, chose rather to offer a whirlwind historical overview from Christ to the Reformation, culminating with the achievement of the Reformers in making once again accessible to ‘millions of faithful worshippers’ the ‘infinite riches’ of the Bible which had been ‘locked up for so many dark ages’.³⁹ James Benjamin Gillman, a Wesleyan minister preaching in Dublin, focused on an examination of the composition and nature of the Bible itself and exhorted his hearers to engage in close devotional reading.⁴⁰ Common to them all, however, was emphasis on Scripture as the vital root source of Christian revelation and authority, characterization of the Reformers as significant above all because they rediscovered the Bible and made it widely available, and an implicit assumption that the teaching and ethos of nineteenth-century evangelicalism were substantively equivalent to those of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

Beyond the middle ground of evangelical Anglicanism and Wesleyanism, an examination of other extant published sermons on the tercentenary shows that common deference to the Reformation was often in reality a cloak for scoring points in contemporary controversies with fellow Protestants. The combative High Churchman J.E.N. Molesworth (subsequently Vicar of Rochdale), who had initially claimed that he rather than Horne had first advanced the idea for the commemoration,⁴¹ in the preface to his published sermon rejected the suggestion that

‘the Reformation should be contemplated, at this time, solely in a religious point of view, without any reference to politics.’ In Molesworth’s view political engagement was essential when current measures were tending ‘to betray the religious principles of our protestant constitution’.⁴² In the body of the sermon he expounded the traditional High Church view that the Church of England was ‘an ancient and true branch of Christ’s holy catholic church’,⁴³ and he supplemented it with appendices attacking the Irish appropriation clause. John William Whittaker, the Vicar of Blackburn, marked the anniversary by preaching no less than five sermons on ‘The Catholic Church’, consisting of those churches ‘which retain the pure faith of Jesus Christ’, including the Church of England but not the Church of Rome. He went on to denounce the errors of Popery on the one hand, and on the other, the ‘vain-glory, self-seeking and self-adulation which prevents men from acquiescing in the authority of the church in things indifferent to salvation’. He evidently saw this attitude as the root cause of Protestant Dissent.⁴⁴

Conversely, the Unitarian, R. Brook Aspland, preaching in Bristol, saw the commemoration of the Reformation as an occasion for an implicit attack on the Church of England. He paid tribute to the achievements of the Reformers in disseminating the Scriptures and affirming their sufficiency for salvation, but held that they ‘grievously erred and strayed from their principles by the early fabrication of articles and confessions of faith, which they forced on the consciences of their fellow-protestants.’⁴⁵ Those who strived to show veneration for the Reformation by upholding articles and creeds were in fact at variance with its fundamental principle, the sufficiency of Scripture. Indeed the ‘great and liberal principle of Protestantism’ actually implied tolerance of Roman Catholics. Hence Aspland declared ‘that if the celebration of this day is regarded as a memorial, merely of the triumph of the

Protestant over the Catholic party, I utterly separate myself from all participation in a scheme which has in it more of pride than religion, and more of vindictive party spirit than of gratitude to God'.⁴⁶

Evangelical Dissenters also perceived a partisan Anglican purpose. In a sermon at Mount Sion Independent Chapel in Tunbridge Wells, Benjamin Slight argued that 'Popery' was not only to be found in the 'Romish Church'. He held that it was also widespread among Protestants, apparent in the 'exclusive spirit' and residual sacramentalism of the Established Church, as well as in the minds and hearts of professed Protestants who believed in the efficacy of good works or failed to abase themselves before the majesty of God.⁴⁷ The most measured and influential published Nonconformist sermon, however, came from William Jay, minister of Argyle Chapel in Bath and a leading Independent. Publication had been encouraged by an unnamed 'liberal Episcopalian' who wanted to pour oil 'upon the troubled waters of political and religious controversy'.⁴⁸ Jay sought to refute the charge that Dissenters were 'less adverse to Popery than many of their brethren in the Establishment' by highlighting the distinction between opposition to 'Popery' as false religious teaching, and support for Catholic civil rights and the removal of 'every vestige and aspect of persecution'. Hence he directly attacked the Reformation Society, which had been particularly active in the Bath area, as at best misguided and counterproductive, and at worst serving a hidden political agenda:

What has been the effect of Societies established to summon public meetings, to send forth itinerant haranguers, to challenge warfare, to hurl defiance, to organize and parade a number of attempts *professedly and expressly* to oppose and subdue? Has it not caused a reaction, and raised such a zeal in the Catholic cause as was scarcely ever before witnessed? And is it politics, or prejudice, or misdirected yet conscientious piety, that is still preaching up crusades like these? ⁴⁹

While recognizing the importance of the Reformation, and seeing the hand of God at work in it, Jay also dwelt on its limitations, especially in the attempt to impose religious uniformity. This however was an error of the times rather than of individuals, but after three centuries there was now a much advanced understanding of the importance of civil and religious liberty. Hence while inspiration should be drawn from the positive achievements of the Reformation, its negative repressive side should not be a model for contemporary Christians. Moreover truth would prevail and the errors of Popery, whose doom was prophesied in Scripture, would wither away of their own accord.⁵⁰ Jay though was fearful of ‘the Popery of Protestantism’ which opposed Popery in its own authoritarian spirit: ‘What is bigotry but the ape of Popery; or a species of persecution, ashamed or afraid, or unable to act? What is High-Churchism, but Popery in the bud, or in the embryo?’⁵¹ The publication of the sermon provoked a published riposte from Thomas Lathbury, a moderate High Churchman with staunchly anti-Catholic views, who saw it as inconsistent with Jay’s earlier profession of goodwill towards the Church of England, and too complacent regarding the dangers of Roman Catholicism.⁵²

Rounded historical knowledge was at a premium in the commemoration sermons. A few preachers, such as Charles Marshall, lecturer at St Bartholomew by the Exchange where Coverdale was buried, displayed considerable scholarship,⁵³ but most appeared to be basing their discourses on very limited information, dependent at best on the surveys by Horne and Timpson. Hence in general the 1835 commemoration reinforced the tendency to view the Reformation through the lens of contemporary conflict with Roman Catholics and controversies between Protestants rather than to make serious attempts to understand it in its own historical context. It is important to emphasize that this increasing reference to the Reformation, fuelled in

particular by events in Ireland, pre-dated serious evangelical concern about the Romeward leanings of the Oxford Movement. Although Dissenters perceived the Reformation of the Church of England as still incomplete, they did not yet fear it was going into reverse; Anglican evangelicals might see their co-religionists as lukewarm Protestants, but not as incipient Romanists.

However, after October 1835 a sense of identification with the Reformation was a significant factor predisposing evangelicals both to suspicion of the Oxford Tractarians and to taking a greater interest in history. Both trends soon manifested themselves, with the publication early in 1836 of a selection of writings by the English Reformers compiled by the popular evangelical devotional writer and former secretary of the Church Missionary Society, Edward Bickersteth (**Plate 2: Bickersteth image here?**).⁵⁴ It was prefaced with his own extended introduction examining ‘The Progress of Popery’ in contemporary England. In the space of eighty pages, Bickersteth had very little specific to say about the sixteenth-century texts he was purportedly introducing. His argument rather was shaped by his own convictions regarding the possibly imminent premillennial second advent of Christ and his associated belief that the Roman Catholic Church was to be equated with the ‘mystery of iniquity’ and the Babylon of the Book of Revelation. Bickersteth believed that there had been a great decay of Protestant principles in his own times and called for a return to the central convictions he attributed to the Protestant Reformers, ‘the pure, faithful gospel message of God’s love to the world in salvation, by Jesus alone, and through faith in his blood’ and ‘THE BIBLE AS THE ONLY STANDARD OF DIVINE TRUTH.’⁵⁵ Having alluded to current controversies in the SPCK over the publication of tracts that in his view went ‘into the very verge of Popery’, he then turned his attention to developments at Oxford:

A highly respectable, learned and devout class of men has risen up at one of our Universities, the tendency of whose writings is departure from Protestantism, and approach to papal doctrine. They publish tracts for the times; and while they oppose the most glaring part of the popery, the infallibility of the Pope, - the worship of images, - transubstantiation and the like, - yet there are brought forward by them the very principles of popery, under deference to human authority, especially that of the Fathers; overvaluing the Christian ministry and the sacraments, and undervaluing justification by faith. With much human learning and diligent study of the Fathers, with great apparent and doubtless in some cases real devotion, and a devotedness ascetic and peculiar, they seem to the author, as far as he has seen and known their course, to open another door to that land of darkness and shadow of death, where the Man of Sin reigns.⁵⁶

Taken as a whole the passage shows how Bickersteth at this stage was still willing to take a charitable view of the Tractarians, perceiving them as misguided rather than perverse. His critique of them also needs to be read as part of his wider attack on lukewarm Protestants who were inadvertently furthering the cause of Rome, including the Dissenters for allying with ‘Antichrist’ in seeking to overthrow the Established Church.⁵⁷ Bickersteth looked forward to the doom of ‘Popery’ at the Second Coming, but in the meantime called on his readers to further the spread of the gospel throughout the world, and to proclaim God’s wrath against Rome. ‘The Reformers’, he asserted, ‘felt this wrath so strongly, that hundreds of them cheerfully yielded their bodies to the burning flame rather than consent to popery.’⁵⁸ Thus, although Bickersteth called for the publication and republication of works by the Reformers and relating to the Reformation era, his own analysis of the ‘Progress of Popery’ did little to further genuine historical understanding. Significantly, although the full volume was only printed once, the introduction was soon detached from it and reprinted as a freestanding tract, which reached its third edition within a month of initial publication. According to Bickersteth’s biographer ‘Hardly any of his works produced so deep a sensation at its first appearance’.⁵⁹

The two most substantial historical works relating to the Reformation to be published or republished in the late 1830s and early 1840s served to reinforce the

perceived equation between the struggles of the sixteenth-century and those of the present day. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* appeared in several full and abridged editions, and to readers preconditioned by hearing sermons on the 1835 tercentenary and by Bickersteth's 'Progress of Popery' it would have seemed like confirmation of what they had been told about the persecuting potential of the Roman Catholic Church if it were to regain power in Britain.⁶⁰ The *History of the Reformation* by the Swiss Protestant Jean Henri Merle D'Aubigné began to appear in English translation in 1838 and had already reached a fifth edition by 1843. It went through numerous further English editions and reprintings during the next two decades. While D'Aubigné's scholarship enhanced his readers' knowledge of the sixteenth century, his standpoint confirmed their predisposition to see their contemporary situation as comparable.⁶¹ Against this background, it was entirely understandable that the negative views of the Reformation contained in the coincidental publication of Hurrell Froude's *Remains* in February 1838 should have stimulated a decisive shift in evangelical views of the Oxford Movement from the measured suspicion expressed by Bickersteth in 1836 to much more unqualified fear and hostility.⁶²

In the meantime reawakened interest in the Reformation led from 1837 onwards to the movement to build the Martyrs Memorial in Oxford, which, as Andrew Atherstone has recently demonstrated, was initially inspired quite as much by opposition to Roman Catholicism as by antagonism to the Tractarians.⁶³ Then late 1840 saw the formation of 'The Parker Society for the Publication of the Works of the Fathers and Early Writers of the Reformed English Church'. Its committee was dominated by Anglican evangelicals, including both Horne and Bickersteth along with leading metropolitan clergy such as J.W. Cunningham of Harrow, William Dealtry of Clapham, Baptist Noel of St John's Bedford Row and Daniel Wilson of

Islington.⁶⁴ The Parker Society aimed to ensure that by means of the systematic republication of Reformation texts ‘ a general knowledge of the principles and doctrines held and taught by Cranmer, Ridley, Parker, Whitgift, and their learned and venerable coadjutors will be widely diffused, and rendered accessible to every member of the Church of England.’ The endeavour was felt to be popular and patriotic as well as scholarly:

THE PARKER SOCIETY is indeed a general – a NATIONAL effort, and the Council cannot doubt that it will have the best wishes and active support of everyone who duly estimates the value of those faithful and devoted followers of our blessed Redeemer who are revered as the Fathers of the Reformed English Church – men who counted not their lives dear unto them placed in the balance against the blessing which, by laborious and devoted efforts, they sought to secure to this Protestant land. ⁶⁵

The Society’s success was striking. It had initially hoped for 2,000 subscribers, but by early 1841 it had more than double that number (**Plate 3: Parker Society advert here?**), with a further increase to more than 6,000 by 1842.⁶⁶ It continued to flourish until it completed its task in the mid 1850s.⁶⁷

The formation of the Parker Society marked a significant new phase in the Evangelical identification with the Reformation, which was now leading to serious historical and theological interest in the sixteenth century rather than merely rhetorical appropriation. That transition in part reflected a maturing of attitudes, but also recognition that effective critique of the Tractarians required a deeper understanding of the earlier history and theology of the Church of England. Thus the years after 1841 saw a number of substantial evangelical theological works whose authors explicitly drew on the Reformation legacy in developing a response to Tractarianism. These included William Goode’s massive *Divine Rule of Faith* (1842), Charles Smith Bird’s *Defence of the Principles of the English Reformation* (1843), and Edward Arthur Litton’s *The Church of Christ* (1851).⁶⁸ Litton in particular manifested a

subtlety of historical understanding that went well beyond mere polemic, in comments such as: ‘while the Romanism of Trent is as much the product of the Reformation as Protestantism itself, the questions concerning the Church hold a different place in the two systems, as regards the historical formation of each respectively.’⁶⁹ He was also careful to distinguish ‘the *private writings* of the reformers and their opponents’ from formal public statements by their respective churches. ‘Had this rule’, he wrote, ‘been observed by both parties, how much useless controversy might have been avoided!’⁷⁰

However, for all their learning, such writers did not challenge the underlying premise of the Reformation Society and the 1835 commemoration, that the theology of the Reformers was essentially identical with that of mid-nineteenth century evangelicals.⁷¹ It thus remained possible for a High Church critic to charge evangelicals with misunderstanding and impoverishing the true legacy of the English Reformation by ignoring the extent to which it had established and upheld the authority of the Church.⁷² Meanwhile the raised profile of Tractarianism and the development of an organized campaign for disestablishment divided opinion among evangelical Dissenters. While the *Nonconformist* newspaper came to combine the ‘The dissidence of dissent and the protestantism of the protestant religion’, for moderates such as the Congregationalist John Morison, the Tractarians needed to be resisted by increased solidarity between ‘all enlightened Protestants’, both Anglican and Dissenting, to promote ‘a growing acquaintance among the people with the precious doctrines of the Reformation.’⁷³

Meanwhile, although the 1840s and early 1850s offered further significant Reformation tercentenaries – such as the accession of Edward VI (1547), the first Prayer Book (1549), and the burnings of Latimer and Ridley (1555) and Cranmer (1556) – evangelicals did not attempt to repeat the kind of large scale commemoration

orchestrated in 1835. In part this may have been because in the wake of the strong popular Protestant feeling stirred by contemporary events such as the Maynooth Bill of 1845 and the restoration of the Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy in 1850 they saw less need to appeal to the Reformation. Also the endeavours to promote evangelical unity that culminated in the Evangelical Alliance's founding conference in 1847 were grounded in a forward-looking and inclusive understanding of religious identity rather than one that sought legitimacy from history.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, reference to the Reformation continued common in anti-Catholic discourse, both as epitomising 'the ancient, the pure and the Apostolic' faith in conflict with 'Popery', and as the fountainhead of civil and religious liberties now threatened by Roman Catholic resurgence.⁷⁵ It was also a significant point of reference in protests against the 'Papal Aggression' of 1850.⁷⁶ Moreover the Reformation Society's ongoing programme of meetings, debates and attempted proselytism continued to present the contemporary anti-Catholic crusade as a direct continuation of the Reformation itself. In 1850 that equation between past and present was extended north of the Tweed with the formation of the separate Scottish Reformation Society, which was dominated by the Free Church.⁷⁷

It was not until the anniversary of Elizabeth I's accession in November 1858 and of the Reformation Parliament in Scotland in August 1860 that there was again significant observance of passing tercentenaries. It would seem most plausible to interpret both these commemorations as prompted by awareness that the popular anti-Catholic movement was losing something of the momentum apparent in the early 1850s and that accordingly an appeal to the past would be helpful in reawakening interest. William Goode took the initiative in calling for the 1858 commemoration, first communicating personally with 'a large number' of fellow clergy, and then

publishing a pamphlet arguing that the Reformation was a national blessing, enabling the ‘enjoyment of the pure light of the Gospel, and the unrestricted use of God’s Holy Word’. It was also the source of subsequent national welfare and prosperity.⁷⁸ He acknowledged that some would see commemoration as divisive, but

To cease to warn men against the errors of Rome, its superstitions, idolatries, and corrupt practices of all kinds, to cease to make the Reformation a matter of public thanksgiving to God for His mercy in vouchsafing to us so great a deliverance from the thralldom of a vain and baneful superstition, lest those who are still under its influence, and endeavouring to propagate it among us, should be offended, would be, in fact, to manifest our practical unbelief in our professed creed.⁷⁹

He hoped the celebration would gain cross-party Anglican and Nonconformist support.⁸⁰ Despite the obvious intent to strengthen opposition to Anglo-Catholicism, the explicit target remained Rome rather than Oxford. There was even an echo of the ‘Second Reformation’ movement of the late 1820s in the attempt of Alexander Dallas to utilise the anniversary to raise funds for his Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics.⁸¹ However, although newspaper reports suggest that observance of the tercentenary was geographically quite widespread, it was dominated by evangelical Anglicans, with only limited involvement from Dissenters at this period of heightened tension over church rates.⁸² The published sermons by two staunch evangelicals, Hugh McNeile and John Cale Miller, sought to present the event as an inclusive expression of authentic Anglicanism. Thus McNeile, preaching in front of the Lord Mayor of London, was at pains to ground his arguments in specific references to the Thirty-Nine Articles, while Miller claimed that: ‘I am open to no charge of party spirit – it is neither Low Churchism nor Evangelicalism nor that dreaded bugbear ultra-Protestantism – it is simply Church of Englandism – to remind you that thorough loyalty to our beloved Church involves thorough loyalty to the Reformation.’⁸³ Both men acknowledged that Elizabeth and the Reformers had their faults, especially in

their readiness to resort to force, but these limitations had to be understood in the light of the circumstances of their own times.⁸⁴ Miller said

I stand not here to defend her [Elizabeth's] entire conduct towards Papist or Puritan... But in justice to her memory, and in order to the right appreciation of her policy, we must take our stand-point from the day in which she lived and the circumstances by which she was surrounded. The true principles of religious liberty ... are but imperfectly discerned and defined by not a few even in these later days. In that day they were fully understood by none.⁸⁵

Such sermons thus show the impact of the scholarship of the preceding twenty years, in demonstrating a rather more sophisticated understanding of historical context than those of 1835.

The tercentenary of the Scottish Reformation in 1860 was marked on two different dates, a major four-day convention in Edinburgh in August commemorating the Reformation Parliament and nationwide preaching of sermons on 20 December, to coincide with the first meeting of the General Assembly in 1560.⁸⁶ The August celebration was organized by the Scottish Reformation Society, and included the laying of the foundation stone of the Protestant Institute of Scotland on George IV Bridge. The content of the programme was strongly historical, with a series of papers on the Scottish Reformation forming the backbone of the proceedings. Although predominantly celebratory in tone, they were balanced by one presentation on 'The Errors of the Age of the Reformation'. Alongside the historical papers, speakers reported on the contemporary work of anti-Catholic societies around Britain, Ireland and beyond, implicitly seen as a continuation of the work of the Reformation. A star speaker was the Canadian former priest turned Protestant itinerant lecturer, Charles Chiniquy. Although the Free Church leadership of the event appears to have discouraged Church of Scotland involvement, the convention attracted widespread interdenominational and international participation. Nevertheless there was a

perception that enthusiasts for the Reformation were now contending against extensive indifference among both ministers and leading laity.⁸⁷

By the 1860 evangelicals thus acquired and disseminated a more detailed and rounded historical awareness of the Reformation era than they had possessed in the 1820s and 1830s. However that knowledge did not prevent them from continuing to reinvent the Reformation in their own image, assuming rather than demonstrating continuity between the teachings and practice of the sixteenth century and that of the nineteenth. It followed that it became more difficult for non-evangelical Christians to feel comfortable in asserting their own identification with the Reformation heritage. For their part, evangelicals of the mid- and late nineteenth century who saw themselves as the guardians of a three-hundred-year-old tradition, had lost much of the creative flexibility of their predecessors in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries whose self-image was of a dynamic and innovative religious movement. Their perceptions of continuity with the Reformation should not be confused with reality, but they were nonetheless highly significant.⁸⁸

¹ Reformation Society Minutes, 21 May 1827 (in custody of present General Secretary).

² Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart, eds, *The Emergence of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008). For my own recent analysis of evangelical identity and origins see Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe, *A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-54.

³ Ian Shaw, 'The Evangelical Revival through the eyes of the "Evangelical Century": nineteenth-century perceptions of the origins of evangelicalism', in *Emergence of Evangelicalism*, 302-25.

⁴ For analysis of evangelical anti-Catholicism see Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland 1800-70* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978); David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1984); John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1829-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); John Wolffe, 'Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860' in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, eds Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179-97 and James C. Whisenant, *A Fragile Unity: Anti-Ritualism and the Division of Anglican Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

⁵ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1797) 321-2, 379-80, 429, 438.

⁶ Wilberforce, *Practical View ... with an Introductory Essay by the Rev. Daniel Wilson* (Glasgow: Collins, 1826), xl, lxxiii.

⁷ Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The "Second Reformation" and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800-1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), esp.155-7.

- ⁸ Quoted Stewart J. Brown, *The National Churches of England Ireland and Scotland 1801-46* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 116.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 122-6.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130-1; Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 38-41.
- ¹¹ *Lectures on the Points in Controversy between Romanists and Protestants* (London: James Nisbet, 1828).
- ¹² George Mutter, *On Confession, Absolution and Penance* (London, 1828), 7-8.
- ¹³ James H. Stewart, *Jesus Christ the One Mediator* (London, 1828), 12-13.
- ¹⁴ Disney Robinson, *Protestant Indifference the Greatest Encouragement to Popish Activity* (London: G. Norman, 1829), 11.
- ¹⁵ *Record*, 22 Feb. 1828.
- ¹⁶ *Record*, 15 Aug. 1828.
- ¹⁷ *An Authentic Report of the Discussion which took place at Downpatrick... on Six of the Points of Controversy between the Church of England and the Church of Rome* (Belfast: Guardian, 1828).
- ¹⁸ See published reports, and newspaper accounts in *The Record* and respective local newspapers.
- ¹⁹ *Discussion at Downpatrick*, 1-2.
- ²⁰ *Report of a Discussion on the Rule of Faith and the Sacrifice of the Mass, at a Meeting of the Reformation Society held in the Music Hall Liverpool* (Liverpool: Egerton Smith, 1830), 10-17.
- ²¹ *An Authenticated Report of the Discussion which took place in the Chapel of the Roman Catholic College of Downside* (London: Rivington, 1836), 4-19.
- ²² *The Seventh Annual Report of The British Society for Promoting the Religious Principles of the Reformation* (London: G. Norman, 1834), 14.
- ²³ *Record*, 15, 22 July 1833.
- ²⁴ Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 76-82.
- ²⁵ *The Times*, 1 Sept. 1835, 6. Horne's letter was first published in the *Standard* of 28 April 1835 and reprinted in the *Ipswich Journal* of 2 May.
- ²⁶ *The Times*, 1 Aug. 1835, 6. On Burgess see Mark Smith, 'Thomas Burgess, Churchman and Reformer', in *Bishop Burgess and his World*, ed. Nigel Yates (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 5-40.
- ²⁷ Thomas Hartwell Horne, *A Protestant Memorial for the Commemoration of ... the Third Centenary of the Reformation* (London: Cadell, 1835), 4.
- ²⁸ John Hambleton, *The English Reformation Commemorated* (London: Forbes and Jackson, 1835), 28; British Library catalogue.
- ²⁹ Thomas Timpson, *The Young Christian's Protestant Memorial for the Commemoration ... of the Third Centenary of the Reformation of Religion* (London, 1835).
- ³⁰ *The Times*, 29 Sept. 1835, 6.
- ³¹ *The Times*, 2 Oct. 1835, 3.
- ³² *The Times*, 8 Sept. 1835, 3; 23 Sept. 1835, 6; 26 Sept. 1835, 6.
- ³³ *The Times*, 8 Sept. 1835, 3.
- ³⁴ *The Times*, 26 Aug. 1835, 3.
- ³⁵ *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1835, 5; 8 Oct. 1835, 5; 9 Oct. 1835, 3; 12 Oct. 1835, 3; *Standard*, 9 Oct. 1835.
- ³⁶ Hambleton, *Reformation Commemorated*, 8, 18-20.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-3.
- ³⁸ T. Davis, *Popery, Whether of Past, or of Present Times, Shewn to Dishonour the Word of God, and to Obstruct its Free Diffusion* (Worcester: R. Childe, 1835), 9.
- ³⁹ W. M. Kinsey, *The Jubilee of the Bible* (London: Rivington, 1835), 32.
- ⁴⁰ J.B. Gillman, *Tercentenary Celebration of the First English Translation of the Whole Bible* (Dublin: Thomas I. White, 1835).
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- ⁴² J.E.N. Molesworth, *The Reformation, not the Establishment of a New Religion* (Canterbury: Kentish Observer, 1835), iii.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁴⁴ J.W. Whitaker, *The Catholic Church: Five Sermons Preached in the Parish Church of Blackburn on Occasion of the Commemoration of the Reformation* (London: John Cochran, 1836), 36, 105.
- ⁴⁵ R. Brook Aspland, *The Sufficiency of the Scriptures the Great Protestant Principle* (Bristol: William Browne, 1835), 17.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18, 21.
- ⁴⁷ B. Slight, *The Prevalence of Popery Considered* (London: W.E. Painter, 1835).
- ⁴⁸ William Jay, *General Remarks on the Reformation* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1835), iii-v.

- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 9-12.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 23-30.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 38.
- ⁵² [T.Lathbury], *A Review of A Sermon by the Rev. W. Jay on the English Reformation* (London: Longman, 1837).
- ⁵³ C. Marshall, *The Written Word Our Hope* (London: Rivington, 1835).
- ⁵⁴ Edward Bickersteth *The Testimony of the Reformers... with Introductory Remarks* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1836).
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- ⁵⁶ Ibid., xlii.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., li.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., lxxiii.
- ⁵⁹ T.R. Birks, *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (2 vols, London: Seeleys, 1851), ii. 78.
- ⁶⁰ For example, *The English Martyrology, Abridged from Foxe by Charlotte Elizabeth* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1837); *The Book of Martyrs* ed. Michael Hobart Seymour (London: Scott, Webster and Geary, 1838); *A Universal History of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Stephen Reed Cattley (8 vols, London: Seeley and Burnside, 1841).
- ⁶¹ Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 111; British Library Catalogue; J.H. Merle D'Aubigné, *History of the Great Reformation* (London: D.Walther, 1838), xiv-xx.
- ⁶² Andrew Atherstone, *Oxford's Protestant Spy: The Controversial Career of Charles Golightly* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 57-8.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 58-83.
- ⁶⁴ *The First Annual Report of the Parker Society* (London, 1841), 4. Of 25 members of the committee, 18 are listed in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, ed. Donald M. Lewis (2 vols, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
- ⁶⁵ *First Annual Report*, 9.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 5, 7.
- ⁶⁷ Peter Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 44.
- ⁶⁸ For analysis of these texts see Toon, *Evangelical Theology*, 73-4, 117-9, 174-5.
- ⁶⁹ Edward Arthur Litton, *The Church of Christ, in Its Idea, Attributes and Ministry* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851), 11.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 21, emphasis in the original.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 204-5.
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- ⁷³ John Morison, *Homilies for the Times, or Rome and Her New Allies: A Plea for the Reformation* (London: Thomas Ward, 1841), 394-5.
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- ⁷⁶ For example Henry J. Ellison, *The Church of England the Bulwark of the Reformation* (London: Hamilton Adams, 1850).
- ⁷⁷ *British Society for Promoting the Religious Principle of the Reformation*, Circular, Nov 1850; Wolffe, *Protestant Crusade*, 160. For detailed information on activities of the two Reformation societies see their journals, *The British Protestant* (from 1845) and *The Bulwark* (from 1851).
- ⁷⁸ William Goode, *Is the Reformation a Blessing?* (London: Hatchard, 1858), 3, 15.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 15.
- ⁸¹ A.R.C. Dallas, *Queen Elizabeth's Legacy* (London: Thomas Harrild, 1858).
- ⁸² *Birmingham Daily Post*, 18 Nov. 1858; *Liverpool Mercury*, 18 Nov. 1858; *Standard*, 18 Nov. 1858; *Hull Packet*, 19 Nov. 1858; *Bristol Mercury*, 20 Nov. 1858.
- ⁸³ Hugh McNeile, *The English Reformation* (Liverpool: Adam Holden, 1858); John C. Miller, *Reformation Blessings, Principles and Responsibilities* (London: Hatchard, 1858), 11.
- ⁸⁴ McNeile, *Reformation*, 18; Miller, *Reformation*, 8-9, 12.

⁸⁵ Miller, *Reformation*, 8.

⁸⁶ *Tercentenary of the Scottish Reformation* ed. J.A. Wylie (Edinburgh: John MacLaren, 1860); *Caledonian Mercury* 21, 22 Dec. 1860; *Glasgow Herald*, 21 Dec. 1860.

⁸⁷ Wylie, *Tercentenary*, x.

⁸⁸ To explore implications for later periods see John Wolffe, 'Change and Continuity in British Anti-Catholicism, 1829-1982', in *Catholicism in Britain and France since 1789* eds Frank Tallett and Nicholas Atkin (London: Hambledon, 1996), 67-83; Whisenant, *Fragile Unity*; Martin Wellings, *Evangelicals Embattled: Responses of Evangelicals in the Church of England to Ritualism, Darwinism and Theological Liberalism, 1890-1830* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); John Maiden, *National Religion and the Prayer Book Controversy, 1927-1928* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009).