# Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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How do we conceptualize and explain religious change in medieval and early modern Europe without perpetuating distorting paradigms inherited from the very era of the past that is the subject of our study? How can we do justice to historical development over time without resorting to linear grand narratives that have their intellectual origins in the very movements that we seek to comprehend?

In one way or another, this challenging question has inspired all my published work to date, which has focused on the ways in which early modern society adapted to the religious revolutions that unfolded before it. My work has explored the ambiguities, anomalies, and ironies that accompany dramatic moments of ideological and cultural rupture. It has sought to balance recognition of the decisive transformations wrought by the Protestant and Catholic Reformations with awareness of the complexities and contradictions that characterized their evolution and entrenchment in practice. It has been marked by a consuming interest in the currents of continuity that tempered, mediated, and even facilitated the upheavals of the early modern era. One consequence of this preoccupation with analyzing how and why cultures are held in tension and suspension during critical phases of transition is that I have been very much less effective in acknowledging and accounting for religious change itself. This is my Achilles' heel as a historian, and one that I share with a number of other historians of my generation. In our strenuous efforts to avoid reproducing models of interpretation predicated on the notion of progress toward modernity, I fear that (to mix the metaphor) we have sometimes been in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

In preparing this article, I have become painfully aware of the extent to which I am both a product and a prisoner of the historiographical

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and epistemological trends I am about to describe. What follows is a series of reflections on recent developments in the religious history of medieval and early modern Europe and an attempt to sketch some frameworks for further debate and discussion. This essay makes no claim to comprehensive coverage: it is colored by my perspective as an early modernist and as a specialist on the British Isles, displays a bias toward Anglo-American scholarship, and concentrates upon the history of Western Christianity at the expense of its rivals. It must also be prefaced by the caveat that it does more to diagnose the diseases that afflict us than to discover their cures. And it proceeds from the position that ultimately we cannot escape from the heritage that has shaped us. The very tools and concepts we use to recover and interpret the past were forged in the eras under consideration. Our scholarship must accept the fact of its own historicity.[1]

My discussion is divided into three main sections: first, some comments on periodization and its problems; second, a survey of some conceptual and methodological tendencies that have enriched, complicated, but also inhibited our understanding of religious change; and third, some consideration of the suggestion that thinking in terms of cycles may provide a fruitful way of delineating historical development across the medieval and early modern periods.

## Periodization and its problems

The first point to make is that the models of historical periodization that still dominate our understanding are a legacy of the very historical processes that are at the center of our investigation. The conventional caesura between the Middle Ages and early modern period has its roots in a Renaissance vision of history—contemporaries saw their own time as one involving the rediscovery of an idealized classical Greek and Roman past and disparaged the intervening centuries as a period of darkness, ignorance, and intellectual and cultural backwardness.[2] This notion of a return *ad fontes* coalesced with a narrative about historical development constructed by Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, who presented their movement not as a novel departure, but as a revival of apostolic Christianity which had been suffocated and corrupted by the medieval papacy and ecclesiastical hierarchy. They claimed that the Church of Rome had buried and perverted the truth of the Gospel for the better part of a millennium.[3] The very concepts of the "medieval" and "early modern," and the epochal boundaries erected between them, are the products of ideological struggles that were in essence about the posses-



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sion of the past.[4] These models of periodization have cast a long shadow: they are reflected in the disciplinary divide between those who study pre- and post-1500 history and enshrined in the structure and organization of academic institutions and of intellectual activity, in the existence of separate conferences and scholarly societies. Although this barrier is now being breached, it still remains inbuilt in the academy.[5] To this we might add the parallel distinctions that have developed between early and late medievalists, where 1100 or 1200 represents a conventional point of demarcation.[6]

Nevertheless, over the last twenty-five years certain interpretative trends have contributed to blurring and breaking down the boundaries implicit in these models of periodization. This may be illustrated with reference to four broad processes—all of which contemporaries recognized and devised terminology to describe. Each of these processes occurred at multiple levels: at the level of individual people and within their minds; at the level of collective structures and mindsets; at the level of thought, but also of practice and behavior; at the level of formal institutions and of wider cultures.

The first is conversion and Christianization—the process by which the constituent societies and political units of Europe repudiated their indigenous religions and embraced the faith associated with Christ; the process by which they rejected the eclectic and heterogeneous phenomenon we call paganism for a monotheistic religion centered upon the redemptive act of sacrifice performed by a god who took human form for the sake of mankind. Christianization was achieved by a combination of spontaneous enthusiasm (personal conversion), persuasion (evangelism and education), and physical force (political coercion, military conquest, and crusade). It has traditionally been regarded as something that occurred in the early Middle Ages, albeit at varying rates in different regions—earlier in Italy and the Mediterranean than in Northern Europe and its geographical fringes like Britain. The acceptance of Christianity in Lithuania, dated to 1386, is conventionally seen as the *terminus ad quem* of this process.[7] But recent work has muddied the waters in a variety of ways: there has been much discussion of when paganism can be said to have been extinguished or supplanted, as well as how far this involved a degree of conscious and unconscious compromise, dialogue, and syncretism between Christianity and the ritual and intellectual systems it supplanted. Questions have been raised about how long residues of older outlooks lingered in individual and collective mentalities. Valerie Flint, Alexander Murray, Karen Louise Jolly, and John Blair among others, have debated the significance of apparent vestiges of "pagan" magic.



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Where some have stressed the tenacity of pre-Christian patterns of belief and ritual, others have emphasized the extent to which and success with which Christianity displaced its predecessors. They have interpreted later medieval allegations about persisting traces of heathen idolatry as figments of clerical imaginations, as distorting images created by the prevailing rhetorics of the age. It is increasingly clear that the problem of pagan survival was in large part a semantic one. The labels medieval churchmen deployed to encapsulate their worries about lay attitudes and practices have themselves created the impression that relics of polytheism and pantheism persisted in the societies they described.[8]

A notable intervention here was an article by John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem,"which vigorously restated the case for a Christian Middle Ages.[9] Van Engen was reacting against the celebrated claim made by Jean Delumeau that the vast majority of Europe's populace was only superficially Christianized on the eve of the Reformation—behind a flimsy facade lay a mighty iceberg and a stubborn edifice of archaic "superstition."[10] Delumeau's thesis, which presented the Catholic and Protestant Reformations as parallel manifestations of a movement that sought to Christianize European society for the *first* time, has shaped a generation of scholarship.[11] It has had the effect of partially displacing the debate about the conversion and Christianization of Europe to the other end of our chronological spectrum. While the high-water mark of this argument has now probably passed, it has left enduring historiographical traces. Again, one of the difficulties historians face is the deceptiveness of the language employed in contemporary polemical texts—the tendency of ministers and zealous lay magistrates to describe popular religion as a form of paganism in thin disguise and to compare their rural parishioners' knowledge of Christianity with that of the "barbaric" races that missionaries encountered in the New World.[12] Protestants added to the confusion by condemning Catholicism as a reincarnation of ancient heathenism.[13]

The second process of religious change falls under the rubric of *reform* and *reformation*. It is important to stress that these words were in use in Latin and other vernaculars throughout the period. Embedded in the Pauline Epistles (specifically Paul's letter to the Romans 12:2), they were employed to describe a process of personal spiritual regeneration akin to the Greek term *metamorphosis*, but also to denote a process of institutional renewal. In both senses *reform* and *reformation* involved the notion of returning to a former state and of recapturing the pristine spirit of Christianity in its infancy. Contemporaries used the term *reform* to designate the



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medieval movements to revitalize monastic life, to inculcate higher standards for the secular clergy, and to reanimate piety and pastoral provision for the laity. They employed it to describe religious developments linked with Popes Gregory VII and Innocent III and with the emergence of the mendicant friars and the observant tendencies among some regular orders in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, together with the conciliar initiatives to reform the church "in head and members" and the humanist calls for the curtailment of abuses that preceded the theological and liturgical upheavals precipitated by Luther's protest against indulgences.[14] And *Reformation* with a capital *R* was invoked to identify the schisms within Christendom initiated by the advent of Protestantism by both its exponents and its enemies—hostile observers spoke disparagingly of "pretended Reformation" or "deformation," while sympathizers celebrated the "blessed Reformation" which God had wrought for them within living memory. The concepts of reform and reformation are thus not anachronisms.[15]

Again, recent historiography has served to complicate our understanding of the relationship between the various phases and manifestations of reform and reformation. On the one hand, deflecting objections that they engage in a "reductive game of precursorism," medievalists like Giles Constable have utilized the term *Reformation* to signify a "profound revolution in religious sentiment" in the twelfth century, a fundamental shift in opinion that involved a turn toward living out the *vita apostolica* within the wider secular world, rather than through studious withdrawal from it.[16] Important new work by Sarah Hamilton, meanwhile, questions assumptions about a disjuncture between the pastoral reforms of the Carolingians in the ninth century and the efforts to reach out to the laity associated with the rise of the mendicant friars and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.[17]

On the other hand, early modernists have been busily modifying the traditional chronology of Reformation in the other direction. The tendency to present it as a highly protracted process extending forwards in time rather than an overnight event is now deeply entrenched. The notion of a "long Reformation" that had not yet reached its endpoint by 1800 has achieved the status of a scholarly orthodoxy, and one of its consequences has been to see later evangelical revivals like the emergence of Methodism in the eighteenth century as integral to rather than separate from it. There are also arguments for stretching the idea of the long Reformation backwards and connecting the legislative interventions and popular impulses that marked the critical decades around 1520 with trends that had begun to destabilize the late medieval church from around 1400, if not with the ongoing official effort to entrench



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the Christian message and combat heterodoxy and heathenism. Here, however, we run the risk of obscuring the ideological and cultural distinctiveness of the religious upheavals of the early and mid-sixteenth century.[18]

Another relevant development is the tendency to see Catholic renewal as a strand of the same reforming impulse instead of something that emerged merely in defensive reaction to Protestant reformation—indeed, to see this as anticipating Protestant initiatives.[19] But, as Euan Cameron has argued, this may eclipse the fundamental doctrinal differences and divergent assumptions that divided these two movements.[20] Squabbles have also ensued about terminology—is "Catholic Reformation" preferable to "Counter-Reformation," or should we abandon both in favor of less contentious formulations like "refashioning"?[21] The debate rumbles on, and has become what Simon Ditchfield calls a classic "Punch and Judy show."[22] John O'Malley's suggestion that we should simply call this phenomenon "early modern Catholicism" has some merit, though this rather bland label may have the side effect of effacing the element of change even more completely and ignoring the dynamism that came from mutual confrontation.[23] John Bossy's influential *Christianity in the West* likewise renounced the term *Reformation* because it carries the implication that in the period between 1400 and 1700 a bad form of the Christian religion was replaced by a good one. Instead, he speaks of "traditional Christianity" and "Christianity translated," though with "a proper sense of the pitfalls involved." In cutting across the classic 1500 divide, his book too has contributed to destabilizing established patterns of periodization.[24]

The same trajectory can be traced in relation to a third process of religious change: what Max Weber called "the disenchantment of" or "the elimination of magic from the world."[25] This process, as conventionally conceived, involves a redrawing of the boundaries between the spheres of the sacred and profane and between the realms of the natural and the supernatural, and an erosion of ideas about the immanence of the holy in ritual actions and the material world. Contemporaries themselves spoke in terms of winnowing the chaff of magic from the wheat of religion and of the eradication of "superstition"—such rhetoric was employed by medieval bishops, inquisitors, and heretics as well as by early modern reformers and moralists. Its subsequent insidious absorption into the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklorists and, moreover, into the mainstream of historical discourse has greatly hampered our capacity to analyze the processes that the rhetoric of superstition was used to reprove. Thereby historians have perpetuated the assumptions about the "irrationality" and "credulity"



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of past systems of belief and practice that underpinned medieval and early modern polemic. They have mistaken subjective characterizations for objective descriptions.[26]

Following in the footsteps of Weber, it has long been conventional to locate the beginnings of this development in the sixteenth century and to link it inextricably with the onset of Protestantism. This is the paradigm that underpinned Keith Thomas's famous *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, for instance, and which found similar expression in twentieth-century German scholarship.[27] Over the last decades, it has come under sustained assault from several sides. The work of the late Bob Scribner did much to question and unsettle this view. He stressed the limits of the role played by the Reformation in effecting disenchantment and highlighted the persistence of assumptions about the intervention of supernatural forces in human affairs, though he did recognize and register a shift from "a sacramental world" to what he termed "a moralized universe."[28] Other work has similarly nuanced the transitions and played up the continuities that attenuated the violent transformations linked with the Reformation.[29] Ulinka Rublack's textbook of 2005 even suggests that the period of apocalyptic ferment and spiritual turmoil between around 1500 and 1650 bears witness to a partial and temporary intensification of older convictions. With Robin Briggs, she sees this as an era of heightened or super-enchantment.[30] The burgeoning body of research on ghosts, angels, miracles, witchcraft, and other related phenomena in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries attests to growing scholarly skepticism about the advance of this process of disenchantment[31]—the demise of magic is being perpetually postponed, so much so that some are starting to speculate that more recent manifestations of interest in the occult may represent a continuation rather than a novel departure or an invented, postmodern tradition. Protestantism's distinctive contribution to dispelling a magical world has also been questioned by fresh awareness of the extent to which the Catholic Reformation itself sought to eliminate the "superstition" that had accumulated around traditional piety.[32] Likewise, the assumption that the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century was inimical to the convictions that underpinned traditional assumptions about the workings of the universe has also been challenged; indeed, much recent work has highlighted the extent to which the transformation of natural philosophy in this period sustained as much as it undermined older ideas.[33]

Euan Cameron's recent *Enchanted Europe* represents something of a backlash against these tendencies—he castigates Scribner and the school of social historians associated with him for minimizing the profound changes



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that occurred in the period and reasserts the thesis that Protestantism set out to demystify the cosmos, and contained within itself a certain "modernizing potential." He thus continues to work within rather than to transcend the framework of debate that has bedevilled this topic to date. He also swings between accepting "superstition" as a relative category and defining it ontologically as "a great amorphous body of arbitrary and disjointed beliefs"—in this sense he persists in interpreting superstition through the same lens and prism as the controversialists he studies. But one of the most salutary and valuable lessons of this book is Cameron's insight that the seeds of disenchantment lay in the period preceding the Reformation: critical elements of reformed thinking on these issues were already present in the work of medieval scholastic theologians. Embedded in their philosophical writings were arguments that were inherently corrosive of traditional Aristotelian metaphysics and existing ways of comprehending the nexus between the sacred and secular realms.[34]

In this respect, Cameron's study connects with tendencies that can be detected in the work of medievalists. One thinks especially of Walter Stephen's provocative claim in *Demon Lovers* that the elaboration of demonological theory beginning in the thirteenth century was a paradoxical side effect of a contemporary "crisis of belief"—a recoil against a vibrant strand of intellectual skepticism about the possibility of supernatural intervention of the kind enshrined in the *Canon Episcopi* of 900.[35] Michael Bailey has advanced the persuasive argument that the tensions and ambiguities inherent in late medieval thought about magic and ritual were themselves a force driving European culture along a trajectory of disenchantment, while Robert Bartlett has recently contended, using the decline of trial by ordeal in the twelfth century as an illustrative example, that the medieval period should not be viewed "as the cartoon Other to modern pragmatic rationalist society but as a stage on the path to it."[36] For all Bartlett's sophistication and subtlety, he too may be guilty of perpetuating the paradigm of modernization that we are all trying so hard to elude. Nevertheless, the effect of this and other current work has been to cast inherited models of periodization into disarray.

The fourth process of religious change is the pluralization or fragmentation of Christianity and its repercussions. Here I mean the process by which official religion was challenged by splinter movements and the changing manner in which the church reacted to the perceived or actual threat that these and other deviant groups represented. Medieval and early modern people described this phenomenon in terms of "heresy" and "sin." Depending



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on their perspective as its perpetrators or victims, they conceptualized their endeavors to restrain and eradicate deviance as either "divine discipline," "charitable hatred," and "wholesome severity" or as unjustified, if not diabolical, persecution. When religious dissenters were reeling and in danger of being driven into extinction, some called for "toleration"—but usually only to give themselves breathing space until they could regain dominance and persecute their erstwhile oppressors out of existence. Political and religious officials themselves conceded and sanctioned "toleration" when the wholesale uprooting of religious deviance proved impossible, though the term was invariably hedged about with apology if not with more perjorative connotations. Toleration was less the opposite of persecution than its alter ego.

Traditional historiographical narratives associated with these developments have followed a predictable pattern. The period after 1200 is associated with what R. I. Moore has called "the formation of a persecuting society"—for him this was the consequence of bureaucratic impulses linked with the rise of papal monarchy and of nascent nation states.[37] Though representing a fresh (though discernably Foucauldian) formulation, Moore's book reinforced an older and more caricatured view that the late Middle Ages was an era of intolerance, inquisition, and tyranny.[38] This was twinned with the idea that the Protestant Reformation played a critical role in the "rise of toleration"—in laying the foundation for a modern liberal society which accommodates and even celebrates difference. The heyday of these intertwined narratives lies in the nineteenth century, but they enjoyed a revival at the time of the Second World War and still find occasional overt expression in Anglo-American scholarship.[39] Nevertheless, these perspectives have been greatly contested by various developments. The tenor of recent revisionist work has been to see the Reformation as an agent of the intensification of persecution; to interpret the turn toward toleration as generally pragmatic, highly contingent, and frequently reversible; and to underscore the precarious limits of the accommodations achieved in practice.[40] Even social historians like Benjamin Kaplan, who have investigated the ingenious arrangements that enabled people divided by faith to live alongside each other in peace, may still implicitly buttress the underlying story of the onward march of toleration, though they play down the achievements of a pantheon of far-sighted thinkers headed by Pierre Bayle and John Locke in favor of a new set of more anonymous heroes—nameless individuals who placed the stability of their communities and neighborhoods above sectarian hatred.[41] Meanwhile, Jonathan Israel's monumental trilogy embodies a spirited reassertion of the progressivist paradigm and of the significance of ideas



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(especially those of Benedict de Spinoza) in powering the Enlightenment.[42] The interrelated assumptions that the seeds of toleration sprang from the soil of Protestantism and that Catholicism was intrinsically hostile to these developments have also been decisively questioned. In the trial records of the Inquisition in Iberia and Latin America, Stuart Schwarz has found evidence that the heterodox view that righteous people of all faiths might be saved and secure a place in paradise was quite common at all levels of Spanish and Portuguese society. In a work that describes itself as "a cultural history of thought," he uncovers a tradition of religious relativism that challenges claims that tolerance was the product of practical necessity, political stalemate, and the philosophical conviction of elites.[43]

Approaching the problem from the other direction, medievalists led by John Laursen and Cary Nederman have been at pains to emphasize the presence of both articulate discourses and considered practices of toleration and tolerance in medieval society.[44] They have pointed to the state of *convivencia* that was the hallmark of interfaith relations in much of Europe until the era of the Crusades and the Jewish expulsions from the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century, as well as to the flexibility that the late medieval church exhibited in relation to dissident tendencies that grew up within it.[45] For all the high profile of the heresy trials and executions of the era and the harsh realities of the mechanisms of repression that the ecclesiastical officials employed, this was an institution within which there was, in the words of John Arnold, more "room for manoeuvre" than there would prove to be in its reformed successors. The Reformation, Arnold suggests, ushered in "a tightening up of definition and control," a greater determination to punish dissent, and a deployment of power that was of a different order.[46] Similar assumptions underlie James Simpson's influential *Reform and Cultural Revolution* and *Burning to Read*. The former is "a narrative of diminishing liberties," a study not of the "progressive acquisition of discursive space in opposition to central power, but rather the reverse," while the latter traces the constraining literary effects of biblical fundamentalism in the post-Reformation era.[47]

The result of these institutional tendencies was that individuals felt "a much stronger sense of having to position [themselves] securely within a precise doctrinal framework."[48] In short, these medievalists suggest that the Reformation produced what early modernists, developing an idea coined by the German scholars Heinz Schilling and Wolfgang Reinhard, have come to call confessionalization.[49] It produced a crystallization of self-conscious religious identities which (with Thomas and Bossy) we persist in seeing as



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a symptom of the transition from medieval to early modern Christianity.[50] Historiographical trends have thus paradoxically served to cement even as they have complicated the models of periodization that we have inherited from the medieval and early modern eras themselves.

## Approaches, models, and interdisciplinary influences

The foregoing tendencies are one dimension of the problems we still face when trying to conceptualize and explain religious change. The second part of this essay examines the ways in which scholarly approaches to the past have evolved in the last fifty years and the impact of interdisciplinary influences upon this.[51] Once again, the ensuing discussion is organized schematically and artificially disentangles threads that are very closely interwoven in practice.

The first theme is teleology. All of the processes examined above have been imported into grand linear narratives about the making of the modern world. The displacement of paganism by Christianity, the Reformation, the disenchantment of the world, and the rise of toleration are part and parcel of a whiggish story of progress toward the more rational and civilized world, infused by a respect for difference and a commitment to liberty of speech and thought, in which we think we live. Together with the demise of feudalism, the advent of printing and mass literacy, the apotheosis of new scientific theories, and the emergence of individualism, these changes have been seen as a prelude and stepping stone toward enlightenment and modernity. Within this tradition of Anglo-American history, Catholicism has often been depicted as a reactionary force of resistance and as an obstacle to development. A further leitmotif is an emphasis on the rapidity and inevitability of change—change envisaged as change for the better—and an implicit or explicit tone of self-congratulation. At root it has entailed celebration of our eventual liberation from the constraining and benighted mindset that marked the Middle Ages. This view underpins prevailing models of periodization and explains why medievalists resent the residual tendency of early modernists to see their period as a mere prelude to a more interesting and important era.[52] The determination of earlier scholars to locate phenomena like the rise of individualism and to identify Renaissances and Reformations prior to 1500—to, as it were, stress the "modernity" of the Middle Ages—may itself be an index of the degree to which we all remain gripped by these paradigms.[53] Efforts to recast the Catholic Reformation less as a rearguard response to Protestantism than as its elder cousin might likewise



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be seen as an attempt to rescue Catholicism from relegation to the status of an enemy of modernization and to claim at least part of the credit for engendering it. The tendency of earlier Italian historians to present Tridentine Catholicism as an essentially negative force in the march toward modernity is no less symptomatic: according to these accounts, one of its few virtues was to have provoked a healthy reaction that ushered in the age of reason and the Neapolitan Enlightenment.[54]

The more recent backlash in the academy against teleological history is one of the reasons why many historians (including myself) have been so squeamish and skeptical about charting development and so reluctant to acknowledge that decisive change took place. Hence, for example, the emphasis on the intolerance of the early modern world and on its continuing adherence to an essentially medieval if slightly modified economy of the sacred; hence, too, the tendency to question associated narratives about the advent of the mechanical press as an agent of major cultural and epistemological transformations. The problem here is that we have not succeeded in escaping from the stranglehold of narratives of modernity; we have merely pushed its emergence further forward in time. Nor has our reaction against these models helped us to comprehend better the origins of the mental and cultural world which we inhabit, or the agents and instruments that brought about those transformations.

It is a striking feature of the recent resurgence of grand narratives like Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* that they are often less concerned with causation than with describing the secession of religion from public life and space and the process by which unbelief eventually became the default option in modern society.[55] Insofar as they attempt the task of explanation, they tend to fall back on earlier Weberian models of "disenchantment" and reproduce ideas about the rise of disciplinary structures and ideals of "civilization" linked with Foucault and Norbert Elias. Explicitly conceived as a counterpoint to traditional triumphalist tales of intellectual emancipation, Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation* revolves around the argument that the cultural preoccupations of Western modernity were an unforeseen consequence of the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pointing to societal sea changes and slow, long-term shifts, his book, too, is reticent about both the part played by human agency and the precise motors and mechanisms by which the incremental developments he charts came about. The story he tells, moreover, is tinged with recrimination: he regards Protestantism as overwhelmingly, if indirectly, responsible for tendencies that amount to a "disaster" and that have left us with "a poisoned



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legacy." In this respect, he reinstates the very polemical framework he avowedly eschews, albeit in reverse.[56]

The second theme is closely linked with the first: the evolving role played by confessional sentiment in the writing of religious history. It is a truism to say that the study of religion in the medieval and early modern eras was, until the late twentieth century, dominated by believers. It was the domain of people convinced of the spiritual truth of the bodies of doctrine and practice that they investigated; it was overtly or subconsciously apologetic in character.[57] This perspective on events presented Protestantism as a swift and popular movement that grasped the hearts of minds of the populace rapidly and put down firm and lasting roots. Its triumph rode on the back of deep dissatisfaction with the late medieval church and its hierarchy, which was riddled with abuse and increasingly failing to meet the spiritual needs of society at large. Burdensome, oppressive, and superstitious, pre-Reformation Catholicism was a yoke that the laity was delighted to throw off in favor of the Gospel of justification by faith. Finding its taproot in the propagandist histories of Protestantism written in the period itself, which heralded its arrival as quite literally providential, this narrative depicted the Middle Ages as a period of deterioration and moribund stagnation and presented the Reformation as an act of liberation.[58] Meanwhile, those who chose to study medieval Christianity as a religious system rather than (or as well as) a political institution were typically members of the priesthood or monastic orders, or committed and devout Catholic laypeople. Protestant historians, by contrast, neglected pre-Reformation piety as an unsuitable and distasteful subject for study. Heirs of the Enlightenment, they dismissed it as irrational and credulous.

The decisive shift in interpretation that emerged in the 1970s and gathered pace in the 80s reflected a more critical awareness of the affinities of these existing historical orthodoxies with confessional myths, and it turned some of them on their heads.[59] The revolution in understanding of the English Reformation is indicative: now this was seen as an unwelcome, unwanted, and haphazard development that did not spring up from below but rather was imposed from above. Contingent on political events and vulnerable to reversal, it met with considerable passive and active resistance: ordinary people dragged their feet and complied reluctantly where they did not rebel outright. Protestant theology and piety, as presented by revisionists such as Christopher Haigh, was alien and forbidding, especially in the guise of predestination and its renewed insistence upon moral asceticism. It faced an uphill struggle to implant itself successfully in the infertile soil



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of popular culture.[60] Echoing tendencies in the scholarship on the German Reformation embodied in the research of Gerald Strauss and others, the keynote of this historiography was its emphasis on the ultimate failure of the Reformation to transform collective mentalities—a theme that reflected the complaints of Protestant ministers of the second generation, whose disillusionment with the superficial, insincere, and "carnal" religion of many of their parishioners shines through the ordinances and homiletic literature of this era.[61]

This pessimistic reassessment of the appeal and impact of Protestantism was accompanied by a reappraisal of the late medieval church and pre-Reformation piety. "Traditional religion," as depicted in Eamon Duffy's deeply influential *The Stripping of the Altars*, was in robust health. It was vibrant, flexible, and vital and continued to command the support and devotion of the English laity until and indeed beyond the eve of its violent demise. Cohesive, harmonious, and community-building, it was unruffled by the specter of significant heresy and untroubled by the privatizing tendencies that some historians have seen as a kind of Trojan horse undermining it from within.[62] Of course, Duffy's reinterpretation might be seen less as a side effect of the withering of religious feeling in historical writing than of its redirection. Not shy of wearing his denominational colors on his sleeve, Duffy's powerful new analysis can be seen as another version of confessionalism. It is impossible to ignore the tone of regret at the passing of this mental and cultural world in his book, and in the evocative picture and exquisite miniature he paints of the rape and pillage of traditional religion in *The Voices of Morebath*.[63] A similar if more muted note of lament can be detected in John Bossy's depiction of the translation of Christianity from a social miracle to an isolating, individual, and asocial creed. For all his sensitive engagement with French sociology, Bossy, too, has found it difficult to elude his Catholic upbringing.[64]

These trends have had three consequences. First, they have made it much harder to account for both the origins and the entrenchment of the Reformation. In seeking an explanation for why this unpopular revolution prevailed, historians have been confronted by what has been christened the "compliance conundrum."[65] Why did people go along with a movement that destroyed a church they allegedly loved? Was the power of the Tudor state so great that it could merely impose its will, or, as more recently proposed by Ethan Shagan, did the common people pragmatically collaborate with a process that enabled them to gain materially?[66] Both the strength and



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the weakness of Shagan's self-styled "post-revisionist" account is its determination to deflect our attention away from a confessional preoccupation with evangelical conversion. In doing so, though, he arguably perpetuates, indirectly, the revisionist precept that Protestantism was an inherently unattractive system of practice and belief and eclipses the significance of a Reformation "loosed by the Holy Spirit" and fuelled by genuine zeal. At times he seems in danger of denying religious belief its agency as a force for historical change.[67] The difficulty implicit in some "post-confessional" history is that it contains a whiff of an older instinct to see religion as a mere cipher of political, economic, and social self-interest.[68]

Secondly, these developments have been responsible in large part for the rise of the trope of the "long Reformation." The prolonged process that entrenched the Reformation in society has been envisaged as a function of the populace's ongoing resistance to the aggressive assault upon its religious heritage. This has also fostered a tendency to see cultural continuities either as forms of defiant "survivalism" or dissimulation or as concessions made by reformed ministers to a mindset that they proved unable to eliminate. Their failure in this respect stemmed mainly from the fact that Protestantism could not offer the same level of sacramental or magical compensation for the day to day problems that beset premodern people living in a hostile environment untamed by technology as that offered by medieval Catholicism. Perceptible beneath the surface of Bob Scribner's work, such functionalism has infiltrated a vast swathe of recent historiography, and few of us have proved completely immune to its seductive influence.[69]

Thirdly, revisionist history has tended to stifle exploration of the changes taking place within late medieval religion. Although Duffy himself emphasized how Catholic devotion adapted to the new conditions and impulses confronting it in the fifteenth century, his work has nevertheless repressed interest in the ways in which "traditional piety" was evolving in the context of fresh intellectual, social, and environmental challenges. The organic transformations and fissures that were developing inside the church are now beginning to receive renewed attention,[70] together with the "perplexing fragility" that some elements of piety (including the cults of pilgrimage and purgatory) exhibited when confronted by Protestantism. Some of these strands of opinion and feeling were inflected by heresies like lollardy, but others had a quite different genesis. They evolved from within "orthodoxy," rather than in defiance of it.[71] George Bernard's recent reassessment of the late medieval church marks a pendulum swing toward greater recog-



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nition of the vulnerabilities that coexisted uneasily with the vitality of this institution and that facilitated its disintegration in the 1530s.[72]

Historiographical paradigms that echo denominational myths persist in other respects. One of these is what Diarmaid MacCulloch has called the "myth of the English Reformation"—the idea that from the start it embodied a carefully constructed via media between the extremes of radical Calvinism and Catholicism.[73] Anglicanism, we have learned, did not emerge fully formed in the critical decades of initial upheaval, but was "invented" by later churchmen like Richard Hooker.[74] More recently, Shagan has shown that the claim to religious moderation was a tool of power used by both contemporaries and their Anglican heirs.[75] A related myth is the notion of English exceptionalism and the accompanying tendency to extract England from the rest of mainland Europe and treat it as sui generis. MacCulloch's magisterial work has sought to correct this view by stressing the interplay and traffic between reform in the British Isles and in the countries that comprised what, with "an element of imperial nostalgia," we still call "the Continent."[76] The longstanding neglect of radical and dissident elements within the Reformation in favor of the dominant and triumphant mainstream further reflects the degree to which our vision continues to be distorted by the story told by the victors in the struggles for hegemony that occurred inside Protestantism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The relative marginalization of Anabaptism from professional scholarship is one manifestation of this displacement of varieties of belief that don't fit the monolithic categories engendered by confessionalization.[77] The virtual absence of the Freewillers from accounts of early evangelicalism is the result of the "airbrushing" of this group from the historical record as an embarrassing "heretical" tendency.[78] Other silences in current historical writing indicate just how far our interpretations are constrained by the decisions made by those who produced the sources upon which we are compelled to rely.[79]

What we have seen, then, is not so much the death of confessional historiography as its reconfiguration. Discussions of whether belief is an aid or obstacle to understanding have not yet evaporated, and although scholarship is steadily moving away from a tendency to take sides, to identify winners and losers, and to answer ill-conceived questions about "success" and "failure" using contemporary standards as a yardstick, narratives born of partisan polemic continue to color the spectacles through which we view the past. Our analyses still bear the trace of ideological concepts and analytical models created by the Reformation and earlier religious movements and are



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shaped by covert biases that derive from these.[80] James Simpson has made the compelling observation that post-Enlightenment, Anglo-American scholarship is itself indebted to and a "reflex" of the Reformation discourse of iconoclasm. Modern categories such as art, taste, and the aesthetic are ironically shaped by fear of idolatry; they neutralize and render licit interest in objects and practices which Protestantism ostensibly repudiates.[81]

Even the tendency "to commend the advantages of emancipating religious history from specific religious commitment" and to assume that those without confessional affiliation are more capable of objectivity and "properly detached scholarship" can be seen as a product of historical processes that have led to the apotheosis of secular values and viewpoints in the academy.[82] Gregory himself provocatively makes this case in *The Unintended Reformation*. He traces the intellectual formation of the assumptions that now govern historical enquiry and calls upon scholars to abandon the conventions of scientific rationalism and religious impartiality that prevail and to be open about their beliefs. The controversy and discomfiture Gregory's book has provoked may itself be a symptom of how much we are the children of the developments he describes, though his own position is not wholly immune to criticisms of internal inconsistency.[83]

The third trend that has impeded, even as it has deepened, our understanding of religious change is the profound influence that the disciplines of sociology and especially anthropology have exerted on our fields of study over the last two generations. The absorption of the insights of social scientists like Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz into the historical mainstream that occurred first in France in the circles of the Annales School and then spread more widely into Continental and Anglo-American scholarship has been immensely fruitful.[84] It has fostered a highly productive tendency to approach the past as a foreign country and as the quarry of ethnography, though initially this entailed a not wholly helpful comparison between historic forms of Christianity and the "primitive" cultures encountered by anthropologists in remote parts of the world, cultures removed in space rather than time. But particularly in its earliest Annaliste phases it also engendered a concern with the inertia and immobility of history—with the extremely gradual geological and biological shifts that take place within the lumbering entities that are collective mentalities. It prompted a preoccupation with the slow Darwinian evolution of the species that is culture rather than with dramatic and violent revolutions of short duration, and it suppressed investigations of the relationship between cause and effect and the



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impact of human action in favor of considering the more impersonal forces by which societies are buffeted in the longue durée. Historical anthropology, in short, has been less interested in change than in durability and stasis.[85]

The cross-fertilization of history with sociology and anthropology, together with the influence of Marxist ideology in the 1950s and 60s, has had two other significant side effects. It precipitated a turn away from ecclesiastical toward social history, and from popes, bishops, priests, and ministers toward ordinary (and often eccentric and marginal) laypeople, and it encouraged a tendency to view the relationship between elite and popular culture as essentially antagonistic and adversarial.[86] Hence the fascination of Carlo Ginzburg, Jacques le Goff, Jean-Claude Schmitt, and others with the ways in which the unlearned and illiterate victims of official coercion and repression subverted but were also subdued by hegemonic processes of acculturation. Such scholars have been interested less in the religious changes associated with Christianization, reformation, disenchantment, and persecution than in Gramscian forms of resistance to them.[87] Despite recent awareness of the problems of these bipolar models and growing emphasis on reciprocal interaction and negotiation rather than aggressive confrontation, we have not entirely succeeded in discarding their underlying assumptions. The current revival of interest in the history of medieval clerical elites and ecclesiastical institutions may be seen less as an abandonment of these traditions of cultural anthropology than as an effort to extend them to embrace individuals and structures that have hitherto been disregarded by its practitioners.[88]

Secondly, the rise of historical anthropology and one of its most characteristic techniques, microhistory, has served to harrow our focus onto particular episodes and incidents. These are approached as emblems, hieroglyphs, and microcosms of wider cultural traits and are investigated using the device of "thick description." They are excavated like archaeological artifacts or fossils or dissected as frozen biological specimens, and the emphasis in analyzing them has been on deciphering meaning rather than inferring causation and examining change over time. This has been deliberate, an attempt to avoid reproducing the grand narratives that have hitherto prevailed.[89] In this respect, the work of microhistorians bears some resemblance to that of early and subsequent folklorists, whose preoccupation with discerning the primordial pagan origins of the beliefs and practices they recorded blinded them to the influences that conditioned their evolution in the interim period.[90] These instincts persist despite growing stress on the need to recognize the mobility of culture and to see it less as a static entity than a fluid and dynamic process.[91]



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The fourth trend that has simultaneously facilitated and hampered our comprehension of religious change is postmodernism. One of the more curious effects of postmodern disillusionment with narratives of progress has been a tendency to reproduce them by inversion: Foucault's own story of the dark underside of Enlightenment and the internalization of the mechanisms of discipline and repression that marked the eighteenth century is a case in point.[92] Moreover, the preoccupation of scholars influenced by the linguistic turn with recovering the inner logic and rationality of past ideologies and with emphasizing the relativity of "reason" has not been accompanied by sufficient consideration of how one form of rationality and reason gave way to another. Stuart Clark's remarkable book *Thinking with Demons* studies demonology as "a working system" of thought "at the height of its powers to persuade." His emphasis on its extraordinary resilience and capacity to contain and absorb pockets of doubt makes it more difficult in many ways makes to solve the riddle of why belief in witchcraft and demonic activity eventually waned. Having dismissed the scientific revolution as the grim reaper of what earlier historians labelled "superstition," it leaves us with a yet more intriguing and intractable problem of explanation.[93]

One of the difficulties associated with assessing long-term transformations of this kind is that the underlying causes of cultural change are often hard to disentangle from their symptoms and side effects. In the case of magic and the supernatural, some recent work has argued that the eighteenth century saw not so much the disintegration of belief in such phenomena as its relocation from the public domain into the private sphere. Some sectors of society became embarrassed to admit openly to an interest in the occult for fear of being dismissed as "credulous," but continued to ponder and investigate it more discreetly. Michael Hunter describes this as the "rise of schizophrenia," while Blair Worden sees it as indicative of an alteration in fashion and taste.[94] Whether this split preceded or followed a shift in the center of intellectual gravity is hard to assess, but both symptoms and side-effects must be credited with agency. Similar issues arise in relation to iconoclasm: should abhorrence of idolatry be seen as the prelude to or the outcome of these rites of violence? We need to think of them as examples not merely of doctrine in action, but also as events in and through which theological positions were forged.[95] The question of what precipitates shifts in individual (and collective) attitude and opinion remains a tricky one. When, how, and why do people change their minds? To what extent were medieval and early modern men and women conscious of the "beliefs" they held, or should we rather conceive of belief as a process and a practice, a verb rather



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than a noun? Such issues are only just beginning to be subjected to theoretical analysis, but one straw in the wind is the attention now being paid to the notion of "conversion" and to the traces these internal "turnings" leave in the contemporary record.[96] One central issue here is the impossibility of unravelling intellectual and affective experience from the narratives in which such internal transformations are described, and by which they are often retrospectively constructed. Another is the need to see "conversion" less as a unidirectional event, in which the outlook of one body of belief and believers prevails, and more as a conversation, involving reciprocity.[97]

This brings us directly to a further consequence of postmodernism that impinges on our understanding of change: the insistence that historians cannot get beyond documents and discourses to the realities that lie behind. The effect of claiming that a veil of language always divides us from the past has been to reduce historical events to epiphenomena of texts and to make us suspect that the movements and transformations we notice in them may be no more than optical illusions and tricks of evidentiary light.[98] The linguistic turn has also sensitized us to the possibility that the continuities we observe in texts might be deceptive: as in the charters and hagiographical lives that proliferated in the wake of the Norman Conquest, textual continuities might disguise genuine moments of rupture and change, and camouflage innovation in the cloak of antiquity and tradition.[99] Furthermore, postmodernism has reminded us that literature and language are not merely mirrors but may also operate as motors and catalysts of transmutation. Words are "social deeds." Shifts in the register of discourse and in literary convention and form may be generative as well as indicative of cultural transformations.[100] Alterations in the use and meaning of words likewise illuminate the conflux of changes in mentality and culture that ought to be at the center of our attention. John Bossy designated this as one of his "migrations of the holy." He considered highly significant the process by which the term *religion* moved from defining an attribute or attitude of piety to designating an objective social and moral entity and an abstract system of practice and belief, in particular as a consequence of the multiplication of versions of the Christian faith in the era of the Reformations.[101] Recent work by Phil Withington has also been attentive to the connections between terminological and social change in ways that deserve emulation.[102] And it should not pass notice that in the guise of what Edward Muir calls the "reformed revolution in ritual theory" the early modern period was a critical juncture in the emergence of the distinction between sign and signified, representation and thing represented, that lies at the heart of the linguistic turn itself.[103]



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## Cycles, generations, and spirals

The final section of this essay briefly explores the hypothesis that thinking in terms of cycles of religious change may help us avoid some of the pitfalls of the linear models of historical development that have long dominated our discipline.[104] It is by no means clear that this can solve the challenges we face, and we must remain mindful of John van Engen's observation that "to treat 'reform' as cyclical, almost predictable, robs its history of drive and contingency—and allows us to get away with explanations or narratives that are ultimately unsatisfying."[105] And it still leaves us with the puzzling issue of causation.

Nevertheless, one dimension to which we need to give more attention is the role of generational change.[106] This deserves scrutiny not least because it was one of the ways in which contemporaries themselves conceptualized historical development; the concept of the seven ages of man was used to describe not just the life cycle of people but also the process of temporal progression.[107] Accordingly, the question of how the denizens of the medieval and early modern world responded to ecclesiastical initiatives and orientated themselves in relation to piety at different stages of their lives demands further exploration. Alongside this we must analyze how and why religious movements themselves age and change as they evolve over time: how and why, for instance, both Christianity and later the Protestant Reformation altered their character as they exchanged the status of illicit, clandestine, dissident sects for official, institutionalized faiths; and how and why, in the English context, Catholicism adapted to its destruction and demise as a church and became what John Bossy calls "a branch of the nonconforming tradition."[108] A further dimension is the manner in which the memory of momentous events which people witnessed and in which they participated was reshaped and selectively edited over time, in accordance with the changing circumstances in which they found themselves.[109]

One element of these transitions is the shift in ideological temper that typically overtakes such movements as they progress from being the beleaguered victims of persecution to its perpetrators. The metamorphosis of "molested lambs" into "raging lions" that accompanied the transformation of Christianity into an imperially sanctioned religion in the fourth century finds a clear parallel in early Lutheranism's turn away from repudiating the use of force in matters of faith to energetically advocating magisterial intervention to suppress Anabaptists and other "false brethren."[110] Both cases reflected the effects of an increasingly close alignment with the structures of



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political authority and power. Another example of this process is the resurgence of clericalism and patriarchalism that marked Protestantism in its second and third generations—a turn away from the egalitarian spirit implicit in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers that had initially provided room for the agency of women and laypeople.[111] The growing conservatism that marked its progression from a deviant movement of adolescent rebellion into the mainstream may be seen as a further manifestation of what Max Weber so helpfully described as the routinization of charisma.[112] Themselves a reaction against this tendency, Quakerism and other forms of sectarianism underwent a similar alteration in the late seventeenth century, shedding the "enthusiastic" tendencies that had been a hallmark of their first phases and acquiring a more sober and respectable complexion.[113] The waves of monastic reform that punctuated the Middle Ages followed a somewhat similar path: as the zeal that inspired them cooled and was subdued by complacency, new impulses emerged that sought to recapture the values of their original founders. Some of these could not be accommodated and were condemned as heretical. The history of the Franciscan order, which became internally riven over the issue of poverty, provides a particularly clear example of this pattern of development.[114] The conservative turn of such religious movements over time and the perception that they were backsliding into worldliness and apathy served to germinate the dormant seeds of religious fervor and inaugurate fresh phases of evangelical revival.

There was a theological aspect to these tendencies. We need to conceptualize theology less as a static body of dogma than as a living and breathing tissue that evolves in response to the social conditions by which it is confronted. This may help to explain how and why some of the rigidities and alienating implications of the doctrine of predestination in first generation Calvinism were gradually attenuated. It may elucidate how the antinomian potential of the tenet that the behavior of human beings had no effect on their eternal salvation gave way to a renewed emphasis on moral rigor, and why the writings of late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century puritans like William Perkins are preoccupied with the means by which believers can gain assurance of their elect status. Practical divinity responded to pastoral problems: the psychological anxiety, not to say pathological despair, that predestinarianism engendered in some parishioners induced ministers to make subtle adjustments in the tenor of Calvinist theology. By this means something resembling a new works righteousness reentered Protestantism by the back door.[115]

The perceptible shift in Protestant attitudes toward miracles and



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angelic apparitions over the course of the period might be another index of this process. As the anti-Catholic passions that had animated the early Reformation were displaced by different priorities, the slogans exclaiming that miracles had ceased and that the operations of angels were no longer visible to mere mortals were steadily effaced. The partly imagined threat of rampant skepticism and galloping atheism made late seventeenth-century Protestants increasingly receptive to interventions of the supernatural, not least because these provided valuable ammunition against the allegations of "Sadducees," Deists, and Hobbesian materialists.[116] It is possible to see the late medieval efflorescence of demonological speculation as a similar form of recoil against philosophical trends that had been gaining momentum since the twelfth century.[117] The significant shift in mood that affected early modern Catholicism in the middle decades of the sixteenth century is also relevant: the corrosive vein of critique of "superstition" and "credulity" that was intrinsic to humanism was succeeded by a Tridentine and baroque willingness to brandish the miraculous as a key weapon in the church's armory against heresy. The latter may, in fact, have been stimulated by the former.[118]

The evolution of attitudes toward the idea of sacred space in both the late antique and post-Reformation era offers another illustration of the broad trends I have been delineating. The concept of divine ubiquity stressed in scripture inhibited the development of holy places in early Christianity, but as Peter Brown has argued, their emergence in the fourth century should not be seen as the triumph of vulgar pagan instincts and the capitulation of Byzantine elites to "the naïve animistic ideas of the masses." Rather the emergence of these new territories of grace was a product of the organic evolution of the faith itself and of the piety and political priorities of its aristocratic and urban patrons.[119] The resacralization of space in the later English Reformation can also fruitfully be interpreted in terms of generational change. The violent iconoclasm precipitated by early Protestantism's fierce repudiation of the immanence of the holy produced a counteraction in the guise of the Laudian drive to restore the "beauty of holiness" and redeem the sins of sacrilege committed by their forebears. In turn, their attempts to preserve and reconsecrate neglected and desecrated places fuelled new spasms of iconoclastic destruction during the mid-seventeenth century British wars of religion.[120] Some of the energy of the Counter-Reformation itself may be attributed to the catalytic presence of Protestantism, which compelled it to shift into a different and higher gear.

A critical element in these processes was the modulation and mutation of memory. The drift from narratives of the triumph of Christianity



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over paganism toward narratives of the decline and degeneration of the church that Peter Brown dates to the early fifth century was both a measure and a motor of Christendom's transformation.[121] Similarly, Margaret Aston's insight that regret at the aesthetic atrocities perpetrated by first generation Protestants nourished historical consciousness deserves attention and perhaps also extension. This, too, was not merely a marker of a tidal change in temperament; it also galvanized actions and events.[122]

There is also value in thinking of the larger processes of Christianization and "secularization" in terms other than linear and unilateral ones. Rather than assume a one-way process of transformation, we need to be sensitive to the ebb and flow of religious belief, practice, and feeling across and within different periods. Writing of the more recent collapse of Christian commitment in Western Europe, David Martin suggests it may be better to conceptualize change in terms of "successive Christianizations, followed or accompanied by recoils."[123] This is a model that some historians of attitudes toward the supernatural during the Enlightenment have found attractive, and it may also better capture the complexity of the continual swings from tolerance to intolerance and vice versa than models that assume a steady (but slow and contested) transition "from persecution to toleration."[124]

The notion of cycles of religious change may, then, have some potential as a heuristic tool, but it also carries some undeniable dangers. It would be wrong to think in terms of a never-ending circle that runs perpetually along the same track; we do view and structure our world and its relationship with God and the sacred in different ways from our ancestors, and the past is indeed in many ways a very foreign country. It is not a case of *plus ça change*. It may be better to envisage a spiral—twirling and twisting back and forth but ultimately reaching ahead into a future that cannot yet be fully discerned. Otherwise we risk reducing a three-dimensional process to something far too simple. Metaphors borrowed from the natural sciences might also assist us in describing the intricate, organic, and sometimes unpredictable mechanisms by which entities and processes evolve over time. The coexistence of opposing and contradictory tendencies within religious cultures, for instance, should be the focus of closer attention. One level at which this operates is the contrast and tension between the impulses that underpin the retreat to mysticism and those that favor overt emotionality. Other contradictory tendencies include the dynamic and dialectical interactions between asceticism and sensuality, between dogmatism and doubt, and between intense conviction and caution and skepticism. It may be that



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the very presence of these antinomies and polarities is itself an important catalyst of transmutation.

Finally, we must be careful not to overlook long-term transitions and major paradigm shifts, one of the chief of which, surely, is how we conceptualize historical change itself. For medieval and early modern people, reform, Renaissance, and Reformation involved a return to a mythical golden age. In these cultures that deeply distrusted novelty, disguised innovation under the name of tradition, and regarded age as the guarantor of truth and authenticity, the history of the Christian religion was a quest to restore its primitive origins. Most of its modes were regressive and backward-looking; even in the guise of eschatology it involved the typological fulfillment and consummation of the past in the present and in a millenarian future when Christ would once again reign over his kingdom on earth. The latter was the past *redivivus*. For all the effects of postmodernism and other trends I have described in this essay, we, by contrast, still think of history as a story of forward movement into an unknown, if not necessarily better, temporal zone. This transition from the historical mindset of the medieval and early modern era to the one that now informs and underpins our discipline seems to me to be one of the most important "migrations of the holy" that demands explanation. No less critical is identifying and understanding the shift from thinking of history primarily as a rhetorical art to considering it as a quasi-scientific and impartial discipline, from the medieval conception of history as a self-consciously literary and textual artifact to the later idea that it was a transparent medium through which one could view past realities in a quite different way from the genre of fiction.[125]

The foregoing discussion has revolved around a paradox: it has offered an analysis and diagnosis of historiographical and methodological trends as if it is possible to stand outside of the intellectual and cultural processes that have created us, no less than our predecessors, as scholars. We may not be able to escape from this vicious circle, but we can at least acknowledge our proclivity for mistaking our subjective responses to the past for objective descriptions of it.[126]



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## Notes

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1 Here I echo James Simpson, "Diachronic History and the Shortcomings of Medieval Studies," in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. David Matthews and Gordon McMullan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–30, at 30.

2 Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948); Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969); Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also G. E. Aylmer, "Introductory Survey: From the Renaissance to the Eighteenth Century," and Wolfgang Reinhard, "The Idea of Early Modern History," in *Companion to Historiography*, ed. Michael Bentley (London: Routledge, 1997), 249–80, esp. 250–57, and 281–92 respectively. As Phil Withington has recently shown, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the word *modern* itself denoted critical emulation of and dialogue with the ancient world. Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 73–101. See also the special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007), "Medieval/Renaissance: After Periodization."

3 On Protestant historiography, see John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963); A. G. Dickens and John Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985); *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon, 2 vols. (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 1996); S. J. Barnett, "Where Was Your Church before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined," *Church History* 68, no. 1 (1999): 14–41; Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); the special section "Focal Point: The Protestant Reformation and the Middle Ages," in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte/Archive for Reformation History* 101 (2010): 233–303; *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World*, ed. Simon Ditchfield, Katherine Elliot van Liere, and Howard Louthan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

4 On medievalism, see John Arnold, *What Is Medieval History?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 1–22. For an incisive discussion of the category *feudalism* as another marker between the medieval and early modern era, see Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

5 For a discussion of how this maps onto the divide between print and manuscript, see Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham, eds., *The Uses of Script and Print, 1300–1700*



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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), esp. "Introduction: Script, Print, and History," 1–26; for its significance in literary history, see James Simpson, *The Oxford English Literary History, 1350–1547: Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Simpson, *Under the Hammer: Iconoclasm in the Anglo-American Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12, 16. One reflection of the trend for transcending conventional models of periodization is the burgeoning fashion for thematic analysis across the 1500 divide. Two examples chosen at random are *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and *Sin in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: The Tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins*, ed. Richard G. Newhauser and Susan J. Ridyard (York: York Medieval Press, 2012). There are similar signs in literary studies, including *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and the book series "ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern" edited by David Aers, Sarah Beckwith, and James Simpson for University of Notre Dame Press.

6 This period demarcation is embodied, for example, in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 3: Early Medieval Christianities, c. 600–c. 1100*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *The Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 4: Christianity in Western Europe, c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). John H. Van Engen's "Conclusion: Christendom, c. 1100," in *Early Medieval Christianities*, 625–43, assesses change and dislocation across the 1100 divide.

7 Richard A. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity, 371–1386 AD* (London: HarperCollins, 1997); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (AD 100–400)* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984); Henry Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd ed. (London: Batsford, 1991); Barbara Yorke, *The Conversion of Britain: Religion, Politics, and Society in Britain, c. 600–800* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman, 2006). See also *Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); *Christianizing Peoples and Converting Individuals*, ed. Guyda Armstrong and Ian N. Wood (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 2000); Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2001); *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003); *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

8 Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Alexander Murray, "Missionaries and Magic in Dark-Age Europe," *Past & Present*, no. 136 (1992): 186–205; Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Robert Bartlett, "Reflections on Paganism and Christianity in Medieval Europe," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 101 (1999): 55–76; John Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); James



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Palmer, "Defining Paganism in the Carolingian World," *Early Medieval Europe* 15, no. 4 (2007): 402–25.

9 John H. Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 3 (1986): 519–52. See also his more recent overview, "The Future of Medieval Church History," *Church History* 71, no. 3 (2002): 492–522.

10 Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation*, trans. Jeremy Moiser (London: Burns and Oates, 1977).

11 See the comments of Simon Ditchfield, "Decentering the Catholic Reformation: Papacy and Peoples in the Early Modern World," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 101 (2010): 186–208, at 198–200.

12 For this theme, see, for example, Christopher Hill, "Puritans and 'the Dark Corners of the Land,'" *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 13 (1963): 77–102; David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: The System of the Sacred in Early Modern Terra d'Ottranto* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 5; Adriano Prosperi, "The Missionary," in Rosario Villari, ed., *Baroque Personae*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 160–94, esp. 178–79.

13 See, for example, Thomas Morison, *Papatus, seu depravatae religonis origo et incrementum* (Edinburgh, 1594); Joshua Stopford, *Pagano-Papismus: or, an Exact Parallel between Rome-Pagan and Rome-Christian in their Doctrines and Ceremonies* (London, 1675).

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*siae in capite et in membris* (reformation of the church in head and members): see, among others, Phillip H. Stump, *The Reforms of the Council of Constance (1414–1418)* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

15 For contemporary uses, see *OED*.

16 Constable, *Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 4–5 and passim. See also Brenda Bolton, *The Medieval Reformation* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983).

17 Sarah Hamilton, *Church and People in the Medieval West, 900–1200* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman, 2013).

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19 See, for example, Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire*. For an earlier emphasis on the continuity between medieval and sixteenth-century mysticism and Jesuit spirituality, see Pierre Janelle, *The Catholic Reformation* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1963). For an overview of these historiographical developments, see R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1–9. This perspective is also represented in Michael A. Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (London: Routledge, 1999).

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28 See R. W. Scribner, "The Impact of the Reformation on Daily Life," in *Mensch und Objekt in Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit: Leben, Alltag, Kultur* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 315–43; Scribner, "The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the 'Disenchantment of the World,' " *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (1993): 475–94; Scribner, "Reformation and Desacralisation: From Sacramental World to Moralised Universe," in *Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe*, ed. R. Po-Chia Hsia and R. W. Scribner (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 75–92. See also the essays in Scribner's *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, ed. Lyndal Roper (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

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55 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2007).

56 Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 160.

57 On this historiographical confessionalism in relation to the history of minorities and lesser denominations, see Patrick Collinson, "Towards a Broader Understanding of



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61 Gerald Strauss, "Success and Failure in the German Reformation," *Past & Present*, no. 67 (1975): 30–63; Christopher Haigh, "Success and Failure in the English Reformation," *Past & Present*, no. 173 (2001): 28–49. For many contemporary expressions of this complaint about "carnal" religion, see Christopher Haigh, *The Plain Man's Pathways to Heaven: Kinds of Christianity in Post-Reformation England, 1570–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. parts 2 and 4.

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96 My thinking has been assisted here by attendance at the workshop "Attitudes of Belief," held at Exeter College, Oxford, in April 2012.

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