What have historians been arguing about...

the impact of the English Reformation

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Since the first stirrings of religious reform in the sixteenth century, people have been writing the history of the Reformation, debating what happened and why it happened. John Foxe arguably became the first historian of the English Reformation when he published *Actes and Monuments* in 1563. Better known as 'The Book of Martyrs', Foxe's polemical narrative of heroic Protestant martyrs challenging a corrupt and dysfunctional Catholic Church was enormously influential in its time. Its invigorating tale of a false church swept away by enthusiastic true believers was reproduced in historical works for centuries to come. In the nineteenth century, this triumphant history, in which Protestantism overcame 'popery and tyranny', was perceived to have played a key role in England's emergence as a leader in global affairs: it had allowed the English to shake off superstitious belief, foreign influence and backward medieval ways of thinking, paving the way for the fulfilment of an imperial destiny.

Defaced images of saints on the restored medieval rood screen of St Winifred's Church, Manaton, Dartmoor

Eventually, from the mid-twentieth century, this 'traditional' interpretation of the Reformation was itself swept away by a tide of 'revisionist' scholarship. Alongside a new appreciation of the entanglement of religious causes for reform with dynastic and political circumstances, historians also looked beyond traditional sources of evidence (government correspondence and acts of parliament) to local parish records (churchwarden accounts, church court records) that allowed them to re-examine the Reformation 'from below'.

This new 'view from the pew' was transformative, and by the 1990s Foxe's story had been rewritten. Rather than the inevitable rise of Protestantism, the Reformation was revealed to have been a long and hard-fought campaign, and one that was often unwelcome to the laity. A wealth of local studies, and later Eamon Duffy's magisterial national survey *The Stripping of the Altars*, demonstrated that the Catholic Church was not weak and unpopular; rather the laity were pouring energy and resources into parish churches right up to the break with Rome.[1] A consensus emerged that religious reform had had to be negotiated at every level of the social hierarchy, in every parish. Protestantism really took root in the hearts and minds of the laity only in the middle decades of Elizabeth I's reign, while the process of religious change continued long after that.

In the wake of this revolutionary shift in our understanding of the Reformation, and reflecting broader trends in the discipline, historians have become interested in its social and cultural impact. They seek insights into what it meant to be a Protestant or Catholic in post-Reformation England and try to reconstruct the mentality and world view of people living through this historic watershed. They ask questions such as 'How did ordinary people respond when religious change was ordered from above? How did reformers attempt to re-educate people? Did people believe what they were supposed to? If not, what did they believe? How did changes to belief affect people's behaviour, and the way they understood and conducted their lives?'

There are no straightforward answers to these questions, but Tessa Watt's description of the post-Reformation religious landscape as a 'patchwork of belief' – a layered blend of both Catholic and Protestant influences – has since become widely accepted by many scholars.[2] Rather than erasing traditional piety, historians now argue that Protestantism modified it gradually and slowly, creating myriad overlapping religious cultures and religious identities.

When assessing the meaning and significance of the Reformation for English people, a conventional reliance by historians on textual evidence, in an age when literacy was limited to a small, unrepresentative section of the population, has posed a particular problem. The perspective historians most often encounter in written sources is limited to that of elite, educated, male members of society. Methodological

and theoretical innovations have allowed recent historians to meet this challenge and to move illiterate ordinary folk to the centre stage in their work.

For example, historians have become increasingly aware that, despite Protestant hostility to the use of images and objects in worship, the visual and material continued to play a key role in religious life. Surviving examples of this visual and material culture provide an alternative source of evidence. Tara Hamling's research on religious imagery in domestic settings has revealed a rich Protestant visual art, designed to advance faith and to encourage pious behaviours among members of the household.[3] Scriptural scenes were painted on walls, firebacks depicted martyrs, and crockery portrayed leading Protestant reformers keeping the light of the gospel alive. Focusing attention on the household has also encouraged scholars to consider women's religious roles and how reform disrupted or confirmed hierarchical and patriarchal relationships.

Scholars researching religious outlooks now know that Protestantism did not chase the supernatural away. Rather, demons and angels continued to loom large in people's expectations about how the world worked, and inspired comfort as well as fear. Historians have paid increasing attention to the senses and emotions when seeking to reconstruct past religious experience. Matthew Milner has shown that Protestantism was no less sensual that Catholicism in the ways that it continued to appeal to the eyes, ears and nose.[4] Alec Ryrie's work on 'being Protestant' in Reformation Britain draws on diaries, commonplace books and images, inviting us to consider how religious practices foster a range of emotions, from ecstasy to despair.[5] Other scholars are now beginning to attend to a feature of religion first examined by Kim Hall in the 1990s: the ways that racial and religious thinking were intertwined. Increasingly we are coming to appreciate that religion was a site for defining race, but that it might also function as a means for people to resist racial definition.

Histories of the Reformation today showcase just how revolutionary the emergence of Protestantism was for English society. Its repercussions reverberated throughout political life, and historians' recent research increasingly reveals its profound effect on the social and cultural life of the nation as well.

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Designing enquiries to help students think about interpretations of the impact of the English Reformation

To set interpretations of the impact of the Reformation in their historical context, we might frame an enquiry with the question 'Why did Foxe's interpretation of the Reformation suit historians in nineteenth-century Britain?' Students could draw on and further develop their knowledge of Britain and its empire in the nineteenth-century to explain the longevity of traditional interpretations rooted in Foxe's polemic.

Exploring recent (re-)interpretations offers an opportunity to connect sources of evidence to the interpretations they inform. Framing an enquiry such as 'How have historians changed the way they write the history of the English Reformation?', we might ask students to analyse passages from works by Duffy, Marshall, Hamling and others for their references to and treatment of sources. We can draw out with students why historians have turned to material and visual sources, and ask them to consider whose voices or experiences historians can discern in written sources.

The Editors

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Further reading

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