

BACKGROUNDS TO THE ENGLISH REFORMATION: THREE VIEWS

by Ian Hugh Clary

Introduction

THE QUESTION of the nature of the English Reformation has been something that historians have wrestled with since the sixteenth century.¹ The purpose of this article will not be to trace the debate since that time.² Rather a more modest proposal is offered. What follows is a description of the viewpoints of three recent historians—A. G. Dickens, Eamon Duffy and Diarmaid MacCulloch—in regard to aspects of the Reformation in England. Though their studies overlap, the three offer differing interpretations of the English Reformation, the latter two considered to be—in varying degree—revisionist against the first. The purpose of focusing on Dickens, Duffy and MacCulloch is to highlight the difference of opinions each has in relation to one another, to the late Middle Ages and the reception of the Reformation.

Due to the influence of Dickens' work, the theme addressed in the early part of his book regarding late-medieval religion in England will inform the basic structure of this essay. This is a subject to which Duffy responds and thus warrants closer examination. Therefore this essay will address the nature of medieval England before the Reformation and the question of whether the country, both politically and popularly, was ready for change. If so, why and what kind of change did they need? Was the ecclesiastical system so corrupt and the religion so superstitious that the people were ready for a new establishment? How influential were heretical groups like the Lollards in setting the stage for eventual change?

A. G. Dickens

The first historian under review is the late A. G. Dickens, former Professor of History at the University of London. His *The English Reformation* held court in studies of early-modern Britain since it was first published in 1964.³ This book is now in its second edition with minor updates in light of recent scholarship.⁴ Dickens provides insight into the background issues that precipitated the Reformation, for instance the nature of medieval religion and the rise of Lollardy. He is concerned to trace the English Reformation from Henry VIII (1491-1547) to the Elizabethan Settlement in 1559. According to

1. Diarmaid MacCulloch, "The Myth of the English Reformation" *History Today* (July 1991): 28-35.

2. For a summary see Rosemary O'Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

3. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964).

4. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* 2nd ed. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993). Citations in this paper will reference the second edition unless otherwise noted.

Rosemary O'Day, "A. G. Dickens's work was both sophisticated and important because it attacked the implicit voluntarism of so much Reformation history and because it reasserted the importance of the spiritual reformation which stood side by side with the legislative."⁵

In an article written in 1967, while discussing the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, Dickens could describe the state of affairs in late-medieval England thus: "English Catholicism, despite its gilded decorations, was an old, unseaworthy and ill-commanded galleon, scarcely able to continue its voyage without the new seamen and shipwrights produced (but produced too late in the day) by the Counter-Reformation."⁶ This quote well sums Dickens' overall perspective on the medieval background of the English Reformation. For Dickens, traditional religion was a hodgepodge of superstitious belief and practice often based upon folktales and legends mixed with Christian sentiment. According to O'Day, Dickens "asserts that the average Englishman was far less interested in religion or theology than most writers on the subject suggest."⁷

Dickens begins his discussion of late-medieval religion in *The English Reformation* by reciting a story from Thomas Ashby's commonplace book of a "certain knight" whose devotion to the Virgin did not keep him from robbing passing travellers. One such traveller happened to be a monk who informs the robber-knight that one of his servants is a demon. Sent by the devil, the demon is to kill the knight the first time he does not offer a prayer to the Virgin—a ritual the knight regularly practiced. Upon hearing of the devilish scheme, the knight repents and the monk casts the demon out of the house, resulting in a transformation in the knight's moral condition. Dickens notes that this tale does not come down from the 1200s, presumably a time when such legends were frequently told. Rather, the story mentions that Pope Julius II (1443-1513) was still alive placing the myth in the late fifteenth century.⁸ This and other such tales were deeply imbedded into the belief structure of the common people. They "exemplify many important elements of the popular and conventional religion—its efforts to attain salvation through devout observances, pits fantastic emphasis on saints, relics and pilgrimages."⁹ What is basic to such stories for Dickens is that the fundamental beliefs of the Christian religion, namely its teaching about Christ, recede into the background of ordinary religious belief: "That the connection of such writings with the Christianity of the Gospel is rather tenuous could be demonstrated with almost mathematic precision."¹⁰

A major fixture in medieval religion was purgatory, a place where the faithful go to be purged of their sins before finally entering heaven. Purgatory was "no mere cult of the vulgar," but was taken up by such thinkers as the Renaissance humanist Thomas More (1478-1535) in his *Supplication of Souls*.¹¹ "More himself," Dickens observes, "makes the suffering dead cry out to the living for more prayers and masses."¹² After providing an example of

5. O'Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 141.

6. A. G. Dickens, "Secular and religious motivation in the pilgrimage of grace" in G. J. Cumming ed., *Studies in Church History IV: The Province of York* (Leiden, 1967), 39-64. Cited in O'Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 130.

7. O'Day, *Debate on the English Reformation*, 137.

8. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 25ff.

9. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 28.

10. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 28.

11. Sir Thomas More, *English Works* (1557), 337-338. Cited in Dickens, *English Reformation*, 29.

12. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 29.

purgatory from *Supplication*, Dickens comments: "This ... was not hell but merely the long prison-sentence which the average man must anticipate, a sentence liable to be much lengthened because other people were slack about buying masses and indulgences to shorten it."¹³ Dickens felt that it was necessary to point out that the deity of purgatory believed in by so sophisticated a thinker as More (and others¹⁴) was viewed in such a sadistic manner because "so many idealisers of medieval religion have supposed that the equally inscrutable Deity of the Calvinists represents some sinister novelty, or that fifteenth-century religion had a childlike gaiety and optimism reminiscent of some sweet group of saints by a Sienese master." According to Dickens, this was a misconception as "medieval men were faced by quite terrifying views of punishment in the life to come; it was small wonder that they felt more comfortable with the saints than with God, or that they came to regard the Blessed Virgin as a merciful mediatrix for ever seeking to placate the divine wrath of the Son as Judge."¹⁵

In regard to the acquisition of religious knowledge, Dickens argues that low literacy rates would not have impeded learning on the part of lay people; hence the proliferation of books teaching popular theology. He cites the role of preaching friars and the exercise of memorization as examples of disseminated religious knowledge amongst those in the distant reaches of society, as in the case of shepherds. If there was access to a religious community, usually a parish, then there was an opportunity to learn Catholic doctrine. Such doctrine was often popular and did not always reflect true Catholic teaching. Certain "vulgar errors" would creep in, a fact not in dispute even amongst contemporary Reformation historians. "Popular theology," Dickens explains, "suggested that those who looked on the host would prosper and avoid blindness or sudden death all that day."¹⁶

Popular theology was also dispersed in books like the thirteenth-century *Lay Folk's Mass Book* and various theological primers. The former was originally published in French and circulated through various regions in Britain in an assortment of dialects. Yet in spite of such popular works, "the vast majority of Tudor Englishmen were far less interested in theology than most modern books concerning the Reformation would suggest. On the other hand, atheism and agnosticism ... scarcely existed."¹⁷ This last statement of Dickens' captures the *Zeitgeist* of late-medieval Britain: though not overly concerned with matters of theology, English people were religiously concerned.

The final sections in *The English Reformation*, dealing with late-medieval religion, center on mysticism both in terms of the so-called "new devotion" and its relation to the Reformation. The *devotio moderna* is described by Dickens as "the deepening of the spiritual life in the later Middle Ages" in Europe. Originating amongst a "small elite" of monastic orders, the *devotio moderna* slowly crept into the laity. The *devotio* taught that there one had to climb a spiritual ladder by the use of spiritual exercises. This enabled "fleet-ing contacts" with the Divine and more generally it placed the practitioner in

13. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 29.

14. Dickens spends nearly seven pages discussing various late-medieval figures and their writings on purgatory and "pretty legends," *English Reformation*, 29-36.

15. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 29.

16. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 36.

17. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 38.

personal contact with the presence of God.¹⁸ The *devotio* emphasized three phases of spiritual journey: (1) the purgative way (mortification of sin); (2) the illuminative way (experiential) and (3) the unitive way (contemplative). This mysticism presented problems for the church. Not only did it have a tendency toward pantheism, it was also infused with a neo-Platonic understanding of divine hierarchy. “The notion that God is the whole of Being,” says Dickens, “that all things have their existence in God, naturally attracted some mystics since it expressed their awareness of absorption into the Divine Being.”¹⁹ Dickens cites Miguel Molinos (1628-1696) as an example of some of the extremes of mysticism. A seventeenth-century Quietist, Molinos “thought that the soul should progress through devotion to the Church, then through devotion to Jesus, then into a superior devotion to God alone, so aspiring to a nirvanic union with the Deity.”²⁰ Such extremists compelled the medieval church to view mystical approaches to spirituality with caution—though not with outright rejection.

Mystical devotion finds its roots in Augustine who transmitted it into the Middle Ages through Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173) and Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225-1274). “Then in the fourteenth century it developed one of its most subtle, diverse and influential phases, it refined its techniques and terminology and it began to express itself in a literature capable of emerging from the confines of the cloister.”²¹ In other words, the *devotio* spread from the monastery to society. In England there were two major mystical influences: the anonymous writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Walter Hilton (ca. 1343-1396), an Augustinian canon of Thurgarton. As well, mystical writings on the continent were gaining wide appeal in Britain, in particular the classic *The Imitation of Christ* written by Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471). Of such influence Dickens says, “On the eve of the Reformation a variety of works inspired by the *devotio* were finding their way into English printing-presses.”²²

All of this serves to prove that, at least in Dickens’ mind, late-medieval/early-modern England was in need of reforming and when Reformation came, it did so with drastic improvement. Dickens observes that the adherents of the *devotio* were not well-equipped to rebut the onslaught of the Reformation, especially of a Henrician political flavour.²³ Instead of facing the changes of the Reformation, those with a mystical disposition tended towards introspection and the practice of an individualist and quietist religion without concern for the events churning in the society around them. “Inexorably the delicate flowers of medieval spirituality had been uprooted by the river in a spate and borne away to remote crannies in a backwater of our national life.”²⁴

The final and probably most important aspect of Dickens’ view of late-medieval England is the rise and influence of Lollardy. The term “Lollard” itself was one of derision. It comes from Middle Dutch and means “mumbler” or “mutterer” of prayers.²⁵ Although applied to other groups in Europe, it

18. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 38-39.

19. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 39.

20. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 39.

21. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 39.

22. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 40.

23. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 43.

24. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 45.

25. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 47.

was first used in England to refer to the followers of the medieval Reformer John Wycliffe (ca. 1330-1384). Wycliffe is one of those figures in history whose life is hidden by the mists of the past: "We know so much of his thought, so little of his thoughts, so little of the inner sources of his radicalism ... a combination of disappointed careerist, temperamental rebel, [and] sincere reformer of immense moral courage ... [b]y all the standards of his time he had become a manifest revolutionary and heresiarch."²⁶

Doctrinally, Wycliffe held that the Bible was the sole standard of life and faith, a perspective opposed by the conservative view that gave church tradition an equal status. It was Wycliffe's practice to place the Bible into the hands of the laity, something that medieval Catholicism largely refused to do. Doctrinally, Wycliffe was a predestinarian whose teaching was stronger even than that of Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1295-1349). Wycliffe's predestinarianism influenced his ecclesiology, for "he restricted the true Church to those persons whom God had predestined to salvation."²⁷ He also rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation calling it an "historical novelty," finding it to be "philosophically unsound." In Wycliffe's Eucharistic theology the body and blood of Christ were present in the elements "not corporally but *sacramentaliter, spiritualiter et virtualiter*."²⁸ Other areas where Wycliffe broke with traditional theology involved his rejection of Papal supremacy, clerical marriage and monasticism. As well, he elevated the role of civic rulers and invested them with the task of reforming the church. Dickens notes that the only area where Wycliffe does not seem to anticipate the Protestant Reformation is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

As often happens with the growth of movements, the Lollards adopted the teachings of their principle expositor but also expanded and radicalized them. As Dickens describes it, "Wycliffe's teaching underwent strange modifications and vicissitudes."²⁹ Wycliffe wrote in Latin to an academic audience, but Lollardy vulgarized his teaching that allowed his principles to reach a larger audience. Although Wycliffe and Lollardy gained popularity in England, neither seemed to take root on a wide scale. Initial inroads were had but later lost; for instance, in the case of John of Gaunt (1340-1399) who initially supported Wycliffe in a political campaign against the bishops, but later abandoned him. Dickens locates the regional influence of the Lollards to certain areas. Some regions had predominant populations of Lollardy, while others less so. Diarmaid MacCulloch refers to Dickens' Lollard schematic as the "great crescent" of southeast England that stretched from Norwich to Hove, including East Anglia, London and Kent. It extended up the Thames Valley and could even be found to a certain degree in Bristol, Gloucester and Coventry.³⁰

Dickens argues that a reason for the lack of growth amongst the Lollards had to do with the persecution they experienced at the hands of church and state. "Persecution forced Lollardy to become a surreptitious congregational sect, lacking effective national leaders and hence precise formularies ... it inevitably developed a fringe of cranks."³¹ However, "ecclesiastical and lay

26. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 46.

27. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 46.

28. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 46.

29. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 47.

30. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 106. For a detailed examination of Lollard population and influence see Dickens, *English Reformation*, 50-56.

31. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 48.

courts often showed gross unfairness toward defendants of any sort.”³² Official opposition forced the Lollards into the underground where “Lollardy became a pertinacious rather than a heroic faith, occupying quiet groups of tradesmen and artisans.” However, this time of quiet was followed by “a marked revival” on the eve of the English Reformation. “From about the year 1490 we hear with ever-increasing frequency of Lollard heretics and of official attempts to obliterate the sect.”³³

Dickens summarizes his conclusions about the Lollards’ impact on the Reformation in England firmly: “That Lollardy thus survived and contributed in some significant degree toward the Protestant Reformation is a fact based upon incontrovertible evidence.”³⁴ Through the writings of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall (1474-1559) of Durham, Dickens locates official concern with the heresy as late as 1536. “By this time,” Dickens adds, “Protestant intellectuals had begun to see Lollard writings as serviceable additions to their arsenal of Reformation-propaganda.”³⁵ Therefore, what Dickens regards as the most of important function of Lollardy is that it “provided a springboard of critical dissent from which the Protestant Reformation could overleap the walls of orthodoxy. The Lollards were the allies and in some measure the begetters of the anticlerical forces which made possible the Henrician revolution, yet they were something more, and the successes of Protestantism seem not wholly intelligible without reference to this earlier ground-swell of popular dissent.”³⁶

Eamon Duffy

The second historian under evaluation, Eamon Duffy, is Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Magdalene College. His work, *The Stripping of the Altars*, offers a revision of the standard “Dickensian” history from a confessionally Roman Catholic perspective.³⁷ The subtitle of his book indicates that the frame of his study spans the years 1400 and 1580, with discussions of the Reformation in its various stages: Henrician, Edwardian, Marian and Elizabethan. Duffy’s purpose is to explain the nature of traditional, medieval religious belief and practice in England to demonstrate that the Reformation was less needed than suggested by Dickens. It is his intention to show that England went from being one of the most Catholic countries in Europe before the Reformation to being one of the most anti-Catholic after.³⁸ The emphasis on the “stripping of the altars” also suggests that the Reformation was less doctrinal and institutional than it was ritual. The first part of the book gives detailed exposition of the religious life of the average English person. He delves into the minutiae of liturgical practice, the cult of the saints, death and purgatory. His breathtaking examination of primary sources takes up almost four hundred pages, whereas his discussion of the development of the English Reformation itself

32. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 48.

33. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 49.

34. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 59.

35. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 60.

36. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 59.

37. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven/London, Connecticut/England: Yale University Press, 2005). For “Dickensian” quote see p. xvii.

38. Cf. Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation* (London: 2003), 107.

is just over one hundred. *The Stripping of the Altars* presents, according to Paul Seaver, the “most richly detailed picture of the old faith we possess.”³⁹

In the rather lengthy preface to the second edition, Duffy explains his motivation for writing as “among other things, an attempt to contribute a shovelful of history to the burial of the venerable historiographical consensus.”⁴⁰ This consensus, as he reveals later in the preface, is that led by Dickens. Duffy explains that “The book was informed by a conviction that the Reformation as actually experienced by ordinary people was not an uncomplicated imaginative liberation, the restoration of true Christianity after a period of degeneration and corruption, but, for good or ill, a great cultural hiatus, which had dug a ditch, deep and dividing between the English people and their past.”⁴¹ He describes his book as “an elegy for a world we had lost,” a world that the Reformers “and many historians ever since” had “misunderstood, traduced and destroyed.”⁴² Although Duffy is aware that his work is not a straightforward history of the English Reformation,⁴³ he does believe that the nature of the Reformation was less doctrinal and institutional than it was ritual.⁴⁴ His primary area of focus is on “the religion of the lay parishioner” and admittedly neglects the religious orders.⁴⁵ He also disregards positive attractions to “the Protestant Gospel.”

One of Duffy’s concerns with *The English Reformation* was that “the component elements of medieval religiosity were presented less as integrated elements in a coherent religious symbol-system than as exhibits in a freak-show.”⁴⁶ Duffy points to Dickens’ story of the demon-haunted knight as evidence. According to Duffy, “Dickens’s book begged many questions about the nature of late-medieval piety.” For Dickens, the Eucharist and the cult of the saints made God appear distant and unrelated. Yet for Duffy, quite the opposite is the case; such rituals were Christocentric: “It never seems to have occurred to him that those who flocked and jostled to ‘see their Maker’ at the elevation in the Mass could hardly be said to be remote from or uncomfortable with their God, or that the clergy who led prayers to the saints or commended pilgrimage, promoted also a religion focussed on their daily celebration of the Eucharist, and thus on a resolutely Christocentric action.”⁴⁷ What for Dickens was a reversal of the biblical teaching on the closeness of God in the medieval period was for Duffy an example of just that. “Dickens work,” Duffy avers, “therefore revealed the fundamentally negative assumptions which underlay much contemporary understanding of the pre-history of the English Reformation, as well as the course of that great revolution itself.”⁴⁸

What is curious about Duffy’s research is that, while it takes very seriously Dickens’ claims about late-medieval religion and does much to offer a counter-balance, he fails to maintain a proper evaluation of Dickens’ other principal piece of evidence: Lollardy. While Dickens goes into great detail regarding the Lollards as forerunners of the Reformation, Duffy pays little at-

39. Paul Seaver, “Review of *The Stripping of the Altars*” in *Religious Studies Review* 20.3 (July 1994): 245.

40. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xiv.

41. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xiv.

42. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xiv.

43. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xv.

44. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xiv.

45. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xv.

46. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xvi.

47. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xvii.

48. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xvii.

tention to them. In his preface he makes note of this as it became a common criticism of the first edition of his book. "That omission," admits Duffy, "was in fact a considered one."⁴⁹ He defends this by stating that his original thesis was to offer an overview of the "complex web of symbol, action and belief" that constituted popular belief at the end of the medieval period. This was needed because Lollard studies abounded in historical accounts of the English Reformation, while studies of common religious practice were neglected. Duffy says of the Lollards, "They were not its subject matter, and in omitting them I assumed that my book would be read alongside, not instead of, the many works which did treat of those things."⁵⁰ This begs a serious question. Dickens sets up Lollardy as an influence upon the religion practiced by the common English person that in turn set the stage for the Reformation. Does Duffy agree with this "Dickensian" interpretation? If so, would this not undermine his thesis? Duffy's intention in the first part of his book is to demonstrate the unity of late-medieval belief at a lay and political level when it came to the acceptance of Roman Catholic teaching. He offers a compelling picture of the late Middle Ages, but this unity is cracked if what Dickens says of the Lollards is true.

It would appear that in the second edition of *The Stripping of the Altars* Duffy recognizes a measure of importance to the Lollards' influence.⁵¹ While pointing out that his first edition did have some discussion of Lollardy in relation to "anti-sacramental polemic" in the book's central discussion of Eucharistic belief,⁵² in the preface to the second edition he dismisses Lollard influence in general as something "grossly exaggerated."⁵³ Duffy contests the claim that the early Protestants were the heirs of the Lollards: "The mainstream of fifteenth-century piety was indeed conventionally censorious of heresy, but not in my view greatly affected, much less shaped, by reaction to it, while the overwhelming majority of early Protestant activists were converts from devout Catholicism, not from Lollardy."⁵⁴ But is this the case? Because Duffy fails to interact directly with Dickens on the issue of Wycliffe's spiritual children it is hard to know his opinion of such issues as why the church and state reacted so violently to the Lollards; why the Lollards enjoyed some measure of political influence; and why there was a "revival" of Lollardy on the eve of the Reformation.⁵⁵ These are driving forces behind Dickens' interpretation of the religious atmosphere of late-medieval England, yet Duffy does not bother to interact with them and offer an opposing conclusion.

The "Duffy thesis" is challenged by another question. If one were to grant Duffy his point that the laity of late-medieval England were satisfied with their spiritual tradition and were not anticipating some form of reformation, does this determine the invalidity of the English Reformation itself? Kenneth

49. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xix.

50. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xix.

51. In a review article of *The Stripping of the Altars* Paul Seaver [*Religious Studies Review* 24.1 (January 1998): 34] observes, "Lollardy has not been neglected by historians, which may explain in part why Haigh and Duffy believe the importance of the movement has been exaggerated; but, while it is difficult to define with anything like statistical precision what Lollardy as a movement and as an ideology contributed to what became early English Protestantism, Anne Hudson's magisterial study suggests why that contribution should not be ignored." Seaver's reference is to Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

52. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xix.

53. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xxi.

54. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, xxi.

55. Dickens, *English Reformation*, 49.

Stewart strikes this note in his analysis of *The Stripping of the Altars*: “This reviewer ... can grant the substantial accuracy of Duffy’s depiction of English satisfaction with the Catholic status quo prior to the dawn of the Reformation ... without feeling that the lightness and eventual triumph of the Reformation are somehow undermined.”⁵⁶ An argument like Duffy’s is akin to arguing that there was no need to be critical of Mao Tse-tung because the Chinese were generally satisfied with their country’s political and economic situation in the twentieth century. Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Stewart continues by noting “that the Duffy argument in favor of the placidity of the Catholic majority of the population is unable to account for many important pieces of data.”⁵⁷ Such data includes the degree of anti-clericalism from the period of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343/4-1400) to the Reformation itself; Henry VIII’s closing of monasteries due to the suspicion of abuse among the laity and the popular demand for Scriptures in the vernacular. Stewart points to the third volume of Kenneth Hylson-Smith’s work *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation* as a substantial counter-balance to Duffy’s work.⁵⁸ According to Stewart, what *The Stripping of the Altars* cannot explain is how “with less violence utilized against residual Catholicism under the two combined monarchies of Edward and Elizabeth than was utilized against Protestants in the remarkably brief reign of Catholic half-sister Mary (1553-58) Protestantism increasingly took hold among a population that began the Tudor period as loyally Catholic as any Europeans of the time.”⁵⁹ If the laity were so comfortable with late-medieval Catholicism, why was there relatively little violence under the Protestantism of the Edwardian and Elizabethan Reformations compared with the particularly bloody interval of Mary’s restoration of Catholicism?

Diarmaid MacCulloch

The third and final historian to be surveyed is Diarmaid MacCulloch, Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford University and Fellow of St. Cross College, Oxford. He is the author of a number of works dealing with the English Reformation including *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603*; *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700*; and his magisterial biography *Thomas Cranmer: A Life*.⁶⁰ MacCulloch has a more positive view of the English Reformation than Duffy while recognizing the value of revisionist conclusions with regard to traditional religion. MacCulloch’s conclusions are not those of Duffy, in that he allows for greater influence of movements like the Lollards.

The Later Reformation in England focuses on the Edwardian Reformation and Puritanism. However, in the fifth chapter he discusses the roots of English Protestantism, with some attention given to the Lollards, and in the

56. Kenneth J. Stewart, “Review of *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*” in *Calvin Theological Journal* 41.2 (2006), 377.

57. Stewart, “Review,” 378.

58. Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation*, vol. 3 (London: SCM Press, 2001).

59. Stewart, “Review,” 379.

60. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603* 2nd ed. British History in Perspective (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001); idem, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700* (London: Penguin Books, 2004); idem, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven/London, Connecticut/England: Yale University Press, 1996).

eighth chapter he explains the reception of the English Reformation. MacCulloch begins the eighth chapter by referencing Duffy's "seminal book *The Stripping of the Altars*" which alongside the work of Beat Kümin "provide the outstanding studies among a proliferation of research revealing the lively parish life of medieval England."⁶¹ MacCulloch largely agrees with Duffy's view of traditional religion: "Outward show might nowadays seem a poor index to genuine piety, but traditional devotion cherished the tangible as a doorway to the intangible."⁶² Thus through rituals like the taking of the Mass or the cult of the saints, the English laity before the Reformation did experience a sense of closeness with God. Nevertheless, MacCulloch asks the pertinent methodological question: "How easily did the Reformation sweep aside such devotional patterns to impose new priorities?" He notes, "In the past, disagreements about this largely depended on the confessional bias of the historical commentator; but the cooling of passions about the reformation has not ended the controversy."⁶³ MacCulloch sees two options for understanding the origins of the English Reformation in light of revisionist interpretations: the English Reformation came either fast or slow. In other words, it came either by an imposition from above (state), or a rising from below (English people).⁶⁴

MacCulloch offers an historical account for why there have been contrasting conclusions in regard to the speed of the spread of the Reformation in England: "The English response to the Reformation was fragmented by region: one area might indeed furnish data for a quick Reformation drawing on substantial support from below, another show a very late popular reaction to what successive Protestant regimes are attempting—slow and from above."⁶⁵ He points to Dickens' "great crescent" that illustrates the popular support for the Reformation throughout the south and east of England. This "great crescent" of Reformation support coincided with areas noted for its Lollardy in medieval England. In chapter five MacCulloch traces the theological link between the Lollards and both the German and Swiss Reformations. As the Germans and Swiss gravitated towards the Reformed and away from the Lutheran wings of the Continental Reformation, the influence of Wycliffe and Lollardy became more prominent. This manifested itself particularly in the English Reformed church. As a result, "One cannot deny that there is a striking coincidence between the areas where Lollardy had been strong ... and Dickens' 'great crescent' of early popular evangelicalism."⁶⁶ MacCulloch observes, "From the 1520s, connections are well-documented between surviving Lollard groups and underground organisations, such as the shadowy groups known as the 'Christian Brethren', bringing continental Reformed literature into the country."⁶⁷

In *Reformation*, MacCulloch explains the concord between earlier Lollardy and the European Reformation. He notes the way in which both utilized politics in order to gain influence—although due to historical circumstance, the Lollards did not maintain the popular longevity that the later Reformation enjoyed. This largely had to do with the fact that Reformation principles could be promulgated quickly and widely due to the invention of the printing

61. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 105.

62. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 105.

63. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 105.

64. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 105.

65. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 105.

66. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 106.

67. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 106.

press. This technology was something that the medieval Lollards had no use of. Culture was another factor that MacCulloch believes also contributed to the Lollard failure to dig deep roots. The Reformation made good use of popular music and hymnody, something that the Lollards did not do. This also may have been the result of limited access to widespread communication. As a result, "Lollards retreated from the mainstream of political power in the kingdom as well as from the universities."⁶⁸ MacCulloch notes that after 1450 the Lollards produced little in the way of new literature, "But went on treasuring their tattered manuscript pamphlets and sections of the Bible in English." They faced only "occasional outbursts of harassment from the authorities."⁶⁹ This seems to comport with what Duffy claimed about Lollard influence at the time. Indeed, MacCulloch states in *The Later Reformation in England* that "a proof of definite links between Lollardy and the English academics who became spokesmen for the Reformation, is the most difficult to substantiate."⁷⁰ He cites the lack of intellectual energy on the part of the Lollards who had no base in the universities and no capacity to produce new literature.

Yet, Lollardy did survive the English church's attempts to completely eradicate it and managed to provide a link between itself and the later Reformation. MacCulloch points to the research of J. F. Davis who "set out convincing links between Lollardy and the earliest English reformers."⁷¹ In this work Davis concludes that in the case of Thomas Bilney (*ca.* 1495-1531), a Protestant martyr who is said to have converted Hugh Latimer (*ca.* 1485-1555) to the Reformation, Lollardy was still in the minds of the English as late as the early sixteenth century. Bilney was educated at Cambridge where, according to Davis, his humanist studies combined with Lollard influences. Due to Bilney's "major influence" on Reformers like Latimer, as well as Matthew Parker (1504-1575), he provides a link between Lollardy and the English Reformation.⁷²

All of this serves to bolster Dickens' earlier argument that Lollardy did have a substantial, though not total, influence on the Reformation. Dickens' own research, confirmed by MacCulloch, demonstrates the link between the Lollards and the growth of the Reformation in the "great crescent." This, coupled with Davis' work on Bilney's Lollard influence, indicates that Duffy's dismissal of the Lollards is unwarranted. Therefore, it is safe to suggest that Duffy's view of the unity of late-medieval England in regard to Roman Catholic theology is not so unified after all and that it would have served his purposes to offer a better interpretation of the Lollards rather than arguing that they were unimportant.

Conclusion

The study of history is not a black and white endeavour; there are many variables that make drawing conclusions difficult. Because history ultimately deals with the actions and motivations of human beings, it is necessarily

68. MacCulloch, *Reformation*, 36.

69. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 58.

70. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 58.

71. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 58. J. F. Davis, *Heresy and Reformation in the South East of England, 1520-1559* (London: Royal Historical Society Studies in History 34, 1983).

72. MacCulloch, *Later Reformation*, 58.

complex. This is seen in the case of the English Reformation where no interpretation, no matter how widely accepted, is left unchallenged. While revisionist attempts to dispute the accepted conclusions of earlier scholars often prove helpful, they run the risk of proving more than they set out to do, as in the case of Duffy's challenge to Dickens. While there is much to be said for Duffy's work, in particular his elucidation of late-medieval piety, some of his foundational interpretations are not supported by historical evidence. Dickens established the importance of Lollardy in shaping late-medieval concerns over church abuse that set the stage for the Reformation. While Duffy has dismissed them almost completely, MacCulloch has re-established the Lollards as important influences for the English Reformation. Surely Duffy is correct in stating that much of late-medieval belief, at the state and lay level, was content with the status quo, this satisfaction was not absolute, nor does it prove that the Reformation was unnecessary. As MacCulloch has argued, the Reformation came to certain parts of England much more easily in those areas that enjoyed earlier Lollard influence. Thus Dickens' "great crescent" stands as evidence that the unity that Duffy sought after and admirably described was less than hegemonic. MacCulloch has done much for contemporary Reformation studies, not the least in confirming that Wycliffe and his followers had a key role to play in the religious and political upheaval of sixteenth-century England (and Europe). No matter what one's view of traditional English spirituality was, the Lollards remain an important element in English Reformation historiography.