

power, he himself will begin to reign, and first in England, where the meanest people that are now despised shall have first the revelation of truth, and it shall pass from them to other nations.¹⁵⁹

It was to be a long time before sentiments of this kind could be safely expressed in non-religious form. Meanwhile religious prophecy provided an admirable vehicle for radical propaganda. As a Roman Catholic pointed out,

there is no reformer so forgetful or stupid, but his spirit pretends Scripture, the glory of the Lord, the light and liberty of the Gospel, the planting of saving truth, etc.; and whosoever is opposite to his Spirit is Anti-Christ, the Whore of Babylon, the Beast of the Apocalypse, and therefore must be pulled down, whosoever he be.¹⁶⁰

The belief that God was on their side brought lower-class radicals self-confidence and revolutionary dynamism. It was correspondingly resented by the men of property, who were naturally offended, as one Fifth Monarchist put it, 'that a company of illiterate men and silly women should pretend to any skill in dark prophecies, and to a foresight of future events, which the most learned Rabbis, and the most knowing politicians have not presumed to hope for'.¹⁶¹ After the Restoration religious enthusiasm and levelling were bracketed together in the minds of the ruling classes. They saw them as joint aspects of what Bishop Atterbury was to call the 'desperate contrivance of the needy to bring all things into common';¹⁶² and they did not tire of insisting that the voice of the people should never again be confused with the voice of God.

159. *A Vision which one Mr Brayne (one of the ministers of Winchester) had in September, 1647* (brs., 1649).

160. Preface by N. Strange to *A Missive to his Majesty of Great Britain, King James, written divers yeers since by Doctor Carier* (Paris, 1649), p. 24.

161. Preface by C. Feake to Cary, *The Little Horns Doom*, sig. A6.

162. Quoted by U. Lee, *The Historical Backgrounds of Early Methodist Enthusiasm* (New York, 1931), p. 106.

6.

RELIGION AND THE PEOPLE

On Nov 4 1681 as I travel'd towards Wakefield about Hardger moor I met with a boy, who would needs be talking. I begun to ask him some questions about the principles of religion; he could not tell me how many gods there be, nor persons in the godhead, nor who made the world nor anything about Jesus Christ, nor heaven or hell, or eternity after this life, nor for what end he came into the world, nor what condition he was born in - I askt him whether he thought he was a sinner; he told me he hop't not; yet this was a witty boy and could talk of any worldly things skilfully enough . . . he is 10 yeares of age, cannot read and scarce ever goes to church.

Oliver Heywood, *Diaries*, iv, p. 24

It was never merry England since we were impressed to come to the church.

Browne, the lighterman at Ramsgate, 1581
(*Archaeologia Cantiana*, xxvi [1904], p. 32)

1. *The Church and society*

EVEN after the Reformation, therefore, organized religion continued to help men cope with the practical problems of daily life by providing an explanation for misfortune and a source of guidance in times of uncertainty. There were also attempts to use it for divination and supernatural healing. Why then did some find it necessary to have recourse to magic, astrology and other non-religious systems of belief? This is the problem with which much of the rest of this book will be concerned.

The strength of the challenge presented by these less orthodox beliefs is at first glance very surprising, in view of the apparently impregnable position occupied by the official religion of the post-Reformation period. For the Anglican Church was nothing less than society itself in one of its most important manifestations.¹ Every

1. Further information on this subject may be found in S. L. Ware, *The Elizabethan Parish in Its Ecclesiastical and Financial Aspects* (Baltimore, 1908); A. Heales, *The History and Law of Church Seats or Pews. I. History* (1872); and in Dr Christopher Hill's discussions of the social role of religion in *Economic Problems of the Church from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford, 1956) and *Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England* (1964).

whilst engaged to another': these items from the agenda of an Independent congregation in Northamptonshire indicate the extent to which the sects tried to guide the lives of their members.⁶ It is not surprising that they were particularly successful in London, where they may well have functioned as a home-from-home for first-generation immigrants, just as in modern South Africa separatist churches have helped to fill the gap created by decaying tribal loyalties.⁷

Religion, therefore, had a multi-dimensional character which gave it an importance which contemporary magical beliefs could never rival. They lacked its institutional framework, its systematic theology, its moral code and its wide range of social functions. Nevertheless, orthodox religion did not enjoy a monopoly of popular loyalty, and in several respects it was highly vulnerable to competition from outside.

2. *The need for advice*

The parish clergyman did not merely preside over the formal occasion of religious worship. He was also expected to be a guide and mentor to his parishioners. When disputes broke out between the laity it was to him they were ideally referred. It was often claimed that there were fewer lawsuits in Catholic countries because their priests acted as arbiters for their flocks.⁸ But the same ideal of clerical counselling was to be found in a Protestant environment. George Herbert expected the model parson to be a lawyer as well as a pastor: 'He endures not that any of his flock should go to law; but in any controversy that they should resort to him as their judge.' Bishop Williams of Lincoln was praised by his biographer for arbitrating in contentious matters so as to avoid litigation; while Samuel Fairclough was only one of many Puritan ministers who were famous for making up quarrels between their parishioners.⁹ Peace-making was

6. N. Glass, *The Early History of the Independent Church at Rothwell* (Northampton, 1871), pp. 77, 75. cf. the comments of C. Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution* (1967), p. 166, and B. R. Wilson, *Sects and Society* (1961), p. 354.

7. B. G. M. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (2nd ed., 1961), and B. A. Pauw, *Religion in a Tswana Chiefdom* (1960).

8. A. O. Meyer, *England and the Catholic Church under Elizabeth*, trans. J. R. McKee (1916), p. 209. cf. Aubrey, *Miscellanies*, p. 220.

9. G. Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple* (1652), chap. xxiii; J. Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata* (1693), ii, p. 61; S. Clarke, *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons* (1683), i, p. 175; ii, pp. 120-1; id., *The Lives of Two and Twenty*

a duty incumbent upon all brands of clergy. During the Civil War the lawyers in Parliament were said to have fallen out with their Presbyterian allies, 'not so much upon conscience, as upon fear that the Presbytery spoil their market, and take up most of the country pleas without law'.¹⁰ It is notable, moreover, that the method which George Herbert prescribed for the clerical reconciliation of disputes made the parson the medium through whom the collective sentiments of the whole community were expressed. For when faced by a controversy, the priest 'never decides it alone; but sends for three or four of the ablest of the parish to hear the cause with him, whom he makes to deliver their opinion first; out of which he gathers, in case he be ignorant himself, what to hold'.¹¹

The clerical performance of these tasks, however, had been much weakened by the abolition of the confessional at the Reformation. It is impossible to assess the full nature and working of auricular confession in the Middle Ages, for the evidence simply does not exist; and it would be very easy to exaggerate the sacrament's importance in the life of the Catholic laity. An annual appearance at confession was thought adequate by some clergy, and the layman was seldom required to confess more than three times a year unless he felt himself in deadly sin or imminent danger of death.¹² Confession was thus a relatively infrequent occurrence in the lives of most men, though it was no doubt possible to save up important matters to be ventilated on such occasions. It is hard to tell exactly what passed between the priest and the penitent, though the many extant manuals for medieval confessors make it fairly clear what was supposed to happen: the layman was to confess the sins he had committed since last being shriven, to be examined in the articles of his faith, and to be interrogated about other possible sins of which he had also been guilty but which he had not confessed. The priest then pronounced absolution and imposed some appropriate penance,

English Divines (appended to *A General Martyrologie* (1660)), p. 210. On the Church's peace-making role, see also below, p. 628.

10. *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie*, ed. D. Laing (Edinburgh, 1841-2), ii, p. 360.

11. Herbert, op. cit.

12. B. L. Manning, *The People's Faith in the Time of Wyclif* (Cambridge, 1919), p. 32; W. Lyndwood, *Provinciale* (Oxford, 1679), p. 343; (W. Harrington), *In this Boke are Conteyned the Comendacions of Matrymony* (1528), sig. Eiii. The *English Prymer* (Rouen, 1538), however, urged weekly shriving; F. A. Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation* (1900), p. 287.

usually the recitation of prayers. All this, moreover, took place with a relative lack of privacy, for the modern box confessional was an innovation of the sixteenth century.

This procedure was well designed to secure the enforcement of religious morality, and its disappearance at the Reformation was generally thought to have left a vacuum which even the increasingly active ecclesiastical courts were unable to fill. The personal confession and interrogation of every single layman was potentially an altogether more comprehensive system of social discipline than the isolated prosecution of relatively notorious offenders. The medieval priest, for example, had been able to act as an agent for the detection of theft; there are known cases in which stolen money was handed back as a result of his interrogations.¹³ Some Protestants accordingly looked back to the Middle Ages as a time when the clergy had been able to enforce the standards they taught. 'Then were the consciences of the people kept in so great awe by confession,' wrote John Aubrey, 'that just dealing and virtue was habitual.'¹⁴ Sir Edwin Sandys tells us that before he set out upon his European travels he had always assumed that the confessional was an effective means of discipline and 'a very great restraint to wickedness' (in fact he was to be disappointed, for he found that it operated in a very perfunctory way).¹⁵ The theme was taken up by many Catholic propagandists. The abolition of the confessional had weakened the fabric of society, declared the Catholic *émigré*, Benjamin Carier:

The servants have great liberty against their masters by this means, the children against their parents, the people against their prelates, the subjects against their King . . . for without the use of this sacrament neither can inferiors be kept in awe, but by the gallows, . . . nor superiors be ever told of their errors but by rebellion.¹⁶

Modern population studies suggest that the rate of illegitimacy and pre-nuptial pregnancy may have been higher in seventeenth-century England than in seventeenth-century France.¹⁷ If this con-

13. C. T. Martin in *Archaeologia*, lx(2) (1907), pp. 361-3. cf. below, pp. 599-601.

14. Aubrey, *Miscellanies*, p. 218.

15. (Sir E. Sandys), *Europae Speculum* (Hague, 1629), p. 10.

16. *A Missive to His Majesty of Great Britain, King James, written Divers Years since by Doctor Carier* (Paris, 1649), p. 48.

17. cf. P. Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730* (Paris, 1960), pp. 31, 69; id. in *Population in History*, ed. D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (1965), p. 468; and in *Daedalus* (Spring, 1968), p. 594; L. Pérouas, *Le Diocèse*

jecture turns out to be true, it will be tempting to see the presence or absence of the confessional as the decisive factor, just as Victorian commentators attributed the superior chastity of Irish girls to the same circumstance.¹⁸ Indeed the notable correlation between high illegitimacy rates and Protestantism which so impressed nineteenth-century demographers did not go unnoticed in the seventeenth century. George Hickes, the future Non-Juror and philologist, observed in a remarkable attack upon the Scottish Presbyterians in 1677 that

as for adulteries and fornications, those common failings of these Pharisees, there are more of them committed, and more bastards born within their country, the Western Holy-land, than in all our nation besides. This is evident from comparing the parish registers and the registers of the presbyteries or rural deaneries of those shires with the rest of the parish and presbytery registers in every diocese of the Church.¹⁹

This must have been one of the earliest recorded exercises in the use of parish registers for sociological purposes, and it testifies to the widespread conviction that the unaided Protestant conscience was an inadequate sanction for morality, particularly sexual morality.

In the Middle Ages the confessional had made it easier for the layman to take his problems to the local parson. It had been a rule that confessors should listen patiently to everything the penitent said, regardless of its immediate relevance.²⁰ It may be reasonably surmised that a conscientious priest could find himself being asked for advice on a wide variety of matters, not all of them necessarily spiritual. It was notoriously common for the person confessing to expatiate upon the sins of his neighbours as well as his own. Only in the eighteenth century was the practice of asking for names of accomplices prohibited; every Protestant polemicist knew that the

de la Rochelle de 1648 à 1724 (Paris, 1964), p. 171; P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1965), pp. 134, 140; E. A. Wrigley in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xix (1966), p. 86.

18. F. W. Newman, *Miscellanies*, iii (1889), p. 273; H. C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession, and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (1896), ii, pp. 433-5. But, as J.-L. Flandrin points out, figures about illegitimacy tell one little about actual sexual behaviour unless one makes the (probably incorrect) assumption that fornicating couples employed no form of contraception; *Annales (économies, sociétés, civilisations)*, 24^e année (1969).

19. (G. Hickes), *Ravillac Redivivus* (1678), p. 73 ('53').

20. Lyndwood, *Provinciale*, p. 328.

Roman priest was acquainted with the most intimate secrets of husbands and wives, masters and servants.²¹ It was customary for a Catholic to enlist the aid of the priest when taking decisions about which he felt uncertain. In the seventeenth century a notorious example was Walter Whitford, who in 1649 organized the murder of Isaac Dorislaus, the Commonwealth envoy to the Netherlands, after consulting a popish confessor as to the propriety of the action.²² The primary purpose of private confession, said a Laudian bishop, was 'to inform, instruct and counsel Christian people in their particular actions'.²³

The Church of England had discarded regular auricular confession, but the clergy still wished to keep their role as counsellors and advisers to their flock. The Prayer Book required the curate when administering the Lord's Supper to exhort all those troubled in conscience or needing guidance to repair to him privately for 'ghostly counsel, advice and comfort'. Many bishops made a point of asking in their visitation articles whether this exhortation was being made and whether the secrecy of all resulting confessions was preserved, as required by the Canons of 1604.²⁴ Similar confessions were invited in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick. The Laudians were consequently accused of attempting to revive the practice of compulsory auricular confession;²⁵ and from time to time individual ministers got into trouble for privately ordering their parishioners to do penance without any warrant from the ecclesiastical courts.²⁶

The fact was that most of the clergy felt wistful about the dis-

21. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession*, i, pp. 394-5; W. Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, P.S., 1848), p. 337.

22. *H.M.C., Portland*, i, pp. 591-2. cf. Lea, op. cit., ii, p. 440.

23. Francis White, Bishop of Ely, cited in C. Wordsworth, *Appendix to a Sermon on Evangelical Repentance* (1842), p. 77.

24. E. B. Pusey, *Preface to Abbé Gaume's Manual for Confessors* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1878), pp. xli-xliii.

25. *A Large Supplement of the Canterburian Self-Conviction* (1641), p. 61; J. White, *The First Century of Scandalous, Malignant Priests* (1643), pp. 29, 40, 43; *Walker Revised*, ed. A. G. Matthews (Oxford, 1948), p. 331; *H.M.C., House of Lords, addenda, 1514-1714*, p. 434; J. Rushworth, *Historical Collections* (1721), ii(2), pp. 1378-80; H. Foley, *Records of the English Province of the Society of Jesus* (1877-84), ii, p. 565.

26. P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1967), p. 347; Wells D.R., A 77 (Walter Rawlins, Vicar of Middlezoy, 1587-8). Questions were sometimes asked about this practice in contemporary visitation articles.

appearance of the confessional. The practice of confessing to a minister, on special occasions at least, was defended by Latimer, Ridley, Jewel, Ussher, and many other pillars of the Anglican Church.²⁷ The Presbyterian, Thomas Cartwright, recommended that those in doubt should 'hunt and seek out some discreet and learned minister of God's Word', for information, counsel and comfort about such matters as vows, marriage, restitution of goods and reconciliation with enemies.²⁸ The Puritan, Arthur Hildersham, agreed that private confession to the minister had certain advantages; Richard Greenham was quite certain that more had been lost than gained by abandoning the old system.²⁹ 'For want of auricular confession,' declared one Laudian clergyman, 'some have been brought to confess at the gallows.' 'It will never be well with the Church of England,' said another, 'until confession be set up in it.'³⁰ Everyone agreed that recourse to a minister at times of trouble might be, as Jeremy Taylor put it, 'of great use and benefit'.³¹

In place of the confessional the clergy tried to develop new means (in addition to preaching and exhortation) of influencing the laity in the making of their decisions. Casuistry, that is the resolution of moral dilemmas by skilled theologians, had been a feature of medieval handbooks for confessors; and in the seventeenth century Protestant divines turned out many volumes of 'cases of conscience', in which the educated reader might find the resolution of some hypothetical problem close to his own.³² It was also possible for the godly layman to turn inwards, entrusting his doubts and uncertainties to a spiritual diary, and resolving his problems by recourse to prayer; the psychological function of the Puritan diary or autobio-

27. Many of these expressions of opinion were collected for partisan purposes in such nineteenth-century works as Wordsworth, *Appendix to a Sermon on Evangelical Repentance*, and Pusey's preface to *Abbé Gaume's Manual for Confessors*. cf. T. W. Drury, *Confession and Absolution* (1903).

28. *Cartwrightiana*, ed. A. Peel and L. H. Carlson (1951), pp. 92-7.

29. A. Hildersham, *CLII Lectures upon Psalm LI* (1635), pp. 164-6; *The Workes of ... Richard Greenham*, ed. H. H(olland) (5th edn, 1612), p. 359. cf. R. A. Marchant, *The Puritans and the Church Courts in the Diocese of York, 1560-1642* (1960), pp. 226-7.

30. White, *The First Century of Scandalous, Malignant Priests*, p. 39; N. Wallington, *Historical Notices of Events*, ed. R. Webb (1869), i, p. 192.

31. Quoted by Pusey in preface to *Abbé Gaume's Manual*, p. cxiii.

32. Some of this writing is discussed in T. Wood, *English Casuistical Divinity during the Seventeenth Century* (1952); G. L. Mosse, *The Holy Pretence* (Oxford, 1957); K. Kelly, *Conscience: Dictator or Guide?* (1967).

graphy was, as has often been pointed out, closely parallel to that of the Catholic confessional. But for most people there was no substitute for personal advice; as Jeremy Taylor remarked, 'men will for ever need a living guide'.³³ Godly figures like John Foxe had a charisma which attracted clients with troubled consciences from far and wide; and it has been justly remarked that many Puritan ladies tended to lean on a preacher for regular advice and guidance, just as devout Catholics had looked to their confessor.³⁴ Clerical counselling was an important form of psychotherapy, and the melancholic or would-be suicide was regularly referred to the clergy for help and comfort. Even the magician, John Dee, handed over cases of hysterical illness to the ministrations of godly preachers.³⁵ A skilled casuist, like the Biblical translator, John Rainolds, could thus become 'an oracle', resolving the doubts of all comers; the same term was applied to many of his colleagues.³⁶

But this activity was too informal and uncoordinated to be capable of filling the gap left by the confessional. In any case, it took all sorts of clergy to make the Church; and they still included the ignorant, the non-resident, and the indifferent. In 1603 at least a sixth of all livings were held in plurality.³⁷ Even the best-intentioned minister could set a parish by the ears, for single-minded insistence on the elimination of vice could make him a figure of terror rather than an approachable counsellor; and, however great his devotion to duty, he had lost that faintly magical aura which could lurk behind even the least impressive medieval clerk. Besides, he could no longer compel men to seek his advice. It is not surprising that some of the laity should have turned for guidance to those who were less hesitant about claiming supernatural gifts or special access to some occult source of wisdom.

33. Quoted in Wood, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

34. J. F. Mozley, *John Foxe and his Book* (1940), p. 96; P. Collinson in *Studies in Church History*, ii, ed. G. J. Cuming (1965), p. 260.

35. R. Hunter and I. Macalpine, *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry* (1963), p. 240; Ewen, ii, p. 186. cf. J. Sym, *Lives Preservative against Self-Killing* (1637), p. 324.

36. Wood, *Life and Times*, i, p. 460; Heywood, *Diaries*, i, p. 43; Hunter and Macalpine, *op. cit.*, p. 113; S. Clarke, *The Marrow of Ecclesiastical History* (2nd edn, 1654), pp. 851, 926, 931; id., *The Lives of Two and Twenty Divines*, pp. 210-11; *Memoirs of . . . Ambrose Barnes*, ed. W. H. D. Longstaffe (Surtees Soc., 1867), p. 422; Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata*, ii, pp. 61-2; *Samuel Hartlib and the Advancement of Learning*, ed. C. Webster (Cambridge, 1970), p. 76.

37. Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church*, p. 226.

3. Ignorance and indifference³⁸

The attraction of non-religious systems of belief was enhanced by the fact that the hold of orthodox religion upon the English people had never been complete. Indeed it is problematical as to whether certain sections of the population at this time had any religion at all. Although complete statistics will never be obtainable, it can be confidently said that not all Tudor or Stuart Englishmen went to some kind of church, that many of those who did went with considerable reluctance, and that a certain proportion remained throughout their lives utterly ignorant of the elementary tenets of Christian dogma.

The extent of actual church attendance is impossible to assess, though research currently being done on the few surviving contemporary censuses of communicants will tell us something about the number of persons who made their annual Easter communion: results so far suggest that, although there was a wide variation between parishes, the ninety-nine per cent performance of Easter duties achieved by the Counter-Reformation Church in late seventeenth-century France was almost never attained in England.³⁹ There is also enough circumstantial evidence to show decisively that the actual extent of church-going never approached the legal ideal. Owing to the constant shift of population, for example, some parish churches were too small to hold even half of their potential congregation.⁴⁰ Others were too far away.⁴¹ Many of the recusants and Dissenters who stayed away for reasons of conscience had their own form of religious activity. But there was another class of absentee without any such alibi. For below a certain social level the efforts of the authorities to enforce the duty of church attendance appear to have flagged. Archbishop Grindal's Injunctions for the Province of York

38. Much additional evidence relating to this and the following section may be found in C. Hill, 'Plebeian Irreligion in England', in *Studien über die Revolution*, ed. M. Kossok (Berlin, 1969), which I missed when writing this book.

39. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, pp. 71-3. For France, see G. Le Bras, *Études de sociologie religieuse* (Paris, 1955), i, pp. 276-7; Pérouas, *Le Diocèse de la Rochelle de 1648 à 1724*, p. 162.

40. Comments on their physical inadequacy may be found in C.S.P.D., 1625-6, p. 525; 1637, p. 125; (E. Chamberlayne), *Englands Wants* (1667), pp. 6-7; N. G. Brett-James, *The Growth of Stuart London* (1935), p. 201; R. Nelson, *An Address to Persons of Quality and Estate* (1715), p. 105.

41. W. Vaughan, *The Spirit of Detraction* (1611), p. 94.

coats of fig-leaves, one loud-mouthed parishioner demanded to know where they got the thread to sew them with.⁵³ When another contemporary preacher attempted to explain that Heaven was so high that a millstone would take hundreds of years to come down from it, one of his hearers asked how long in that case it would take a man to get up there.⁵⁴ When the Elizabethan curate of Stogursey, Somerset, went on too long, a member of the congregation bawled out that it was time for him to come down so that the maids might go milking.⁵⁵

Such disrespect was frequently punished in the church courts, but it could arouse sympathy among the congregation. A Cambridgeshire man was charged with indecent behaviour in church in 1598 after his 'most loathsome farting, striking, and scoffing speeches' had occasioned 'the great offence of the good and the great rejoicing of the bad'.⁵⁶ The tone of many Elizabethan congregations seems to have been that of a tiresome class of schoolboys. When they poured out of church into the tavern a stream of blasphemous jokes signified their release from unwelcome restraint. At Westbury, Gloucestershire, in 1610 a gang of youths, after being catechized by the minister, 'fell to dancing, quaffing and rioting', and composed a blasphemous and irreverent catechism of their own.⁵⁷ A tailor of Wisbech was presented in 1601 for a characteristic piece of third-form humour: after a sermon by the vicar on the text, *Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church*.

he in an alehouse taking a full pot in his hand in jesting manner pronounced these words: 'Upon this rock I will build my faith'. And there being in the company one whose name was Peter he applied the matter unto him, saying, 'Thou art Peter', and then, taking the pot he said, 'But upon this rock I will build my church.'⁵⁸

In 1623 a Bromsgrove butcher got into trouble after he had 'reverently' offered a crooked pin to an acquaintance, declaring, 'Take thee this in remembrance that Parkins of Wedgebury died for thee and be thankful.'⁵⁹

53. S. C. Powell, *Puritan Village* (New York, 1965), p. 89.

54. R. Coppin, *Truth's Testimony* (1655), p. 42.

55. Wells D.R., A 98 (1593-4).

56. Ely D.R., B 2/14, f. 137.

57. Gloucester D.R., Vol. 111.

58. Ely D.R., B 2/20, f. 59.

59. *Worcester County Records. The Quarter Sessions Rolls*, ii, ed. J. W. Willis Bund (Worcs. Hist. Soc., 1900), p. 360 (and cf. p. 362).

It is small wonder that in the seventeenth century the godly came to see themselves as a tiny minority in an unregenerate world, and regarded the lower ranks of the people as the greatest enemies of true religion. 'If any would raise an army to extirpate knowledge and religion,' declared Richard Baxter in 1691, 'the tinkers and sow-gelders and crate-carriers and beggars and bargemen and all the rabble that cannot read . . . will be the forwardest to come into such a malitia.' The 'far greater part of the people', he thought, hated practical godliness.⁶⁰ The young people were as bad as the poor: not one young person in a thousand enjoyed prayer or preaching, thought Edward Topsell in 1596. As for beggars, they were 'for the most part utterly void of all fear of God'.⁶¹

The inculcation of religious doctrine was thus a difficult business. The clergy often pitched their discourse far above the capacity of most of their listeners. Those interested in preferment sought to secure it by publishing learned sermons which would attract the eye of an influential patron. In the process they tended to forget that the majority of their local congregation lacked the intellectual sophistication of an educated schoolboy. 'Most ministers in England usually shoot over the heads of their hearers', thought John Dod; and John Locke agreed: 'You . . . may as well talk Arabic to a poor day-labourer as the notions and languages that the books and disputes of religion are filled with; and as soon you will be understood.'⁶² 'There are now extant in English sundry books very profitable, which few of the common people do make use of,' remarked a writer in 1631, 'for that their style and words for the most or a great part are for scholars' reading only.'⁶³

The inadequacies of popular education meant that the efforts of many godly preachers were in vain. Sir Simonds D'Ewes tells us how he learned to take notes on sermons and became a 'rational hearer, . . . whereas before I differed little from the brute creatures that

60. Powicke, 'The Reverend Richard Baxter's Last Treatise', *Bull. John Rylands Lib.*, x (1926), p. 182; R. B. Schlatter, *Richard Baxter and Puritan Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1957), p. 63.

61. (E. Topsell), *The Reward of Religion* (1596), pp. 239, 119.

62. Clarke, *The Lives of Two and Twenty English Divines*, p. 209; *The Works of John Locke* (12th edn, 1824), vi, pp. 157-8. The Jacobean incumbent of Much Dewchurch, Herefordshire, who used to quote the Fathers in Latin before translating them for the benefit of his hearers, provoked one of them to comment that he would rather 'hear a horse fart than the vicar preach in Latin'; Hereford D.R., C.B. 71 (1616-17).

63. E. Reeve, *The Christian Divinitie* (1631), sig. A5v.

it.⁷² In Elizabethan Wales John Penry reported there were thousands of people who knew nothing of Christ – 'yea almost that never heard of him'.⁷³

But this state of affairs was not confined to the dark corners of the land. In Essex in 1656 there were said to be people as ignorant of Christianity as the Red Indians; in the Isle of Axholme the inhabitants had been virtual heathens until the drainage of the Fens; in parts of Wiltshire there was total ignorance of religion; in Hampshire there were 'ignorant heathenish people'.⁷⁴ When thirteen criminals were executed after the London sessions in 1679 the prison chaplain found them 'lamentably ignorant of the principles of religion, as if they had been born in Africk and bred up amongst the savages of America'.⁷⁵

In the Middle Ages it had been well known that many of the rural population were innocent of religious dogma. The fourteenth-century preacher, John Bromyard, used to tell the story of the shepherd who, asked if he knew who the Father, Son and Holy Ghost were, replied, 'The father and the son I know well for I tend their sheep, but I know not that third fellow; there is none of that name in our village.'⁷⁶ Medieval religion had laid its emphasis upon the regular performance of ritual duties, rather than on the memorizing of theological beliefs.⁷⁷ After the Reformation it was assumed that popular ignorance was merely a hangover from Popery; later it was attributed by the Puritans to the lack of a preaching ministry; ultimately it was accepted as a fact of life. Periodic waves of evangelization made their impact on many parishes, but the problem remained. Everyone knows that George Whitefield found the miners of Kingswood – significantly a forest area – 'little

72. C.S.P.D., 1629–31, p. 473; 1598–1601, p. 362; *Calendar of Border Papers*, ii, p. 494.

73. J. Penry, *Three Treatises concerning Wales*, ed. D. Williams (Cardiff, 1960), p. 32. Religious ignorance in Wales and the North is discussed by J. E. C. Hill, 'Puritans and the Dark Corners of the Land', *T.R.H.S.*, 5th ser., xiii (1963).

74. G. F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints* (Oxford, 1957), p. 136; *The Diary of Abraham de la Pryme*, ed. C. Jackson (Surtees Soc., 1870), p. 173; Clarke, *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons*, i, p. 19.

75. *The Execution ... of ... Thirteen Prisoners* (1679), p. 2.

76. Quoted by G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village* (Cambridge, 1925), pp. 265–6. cf. the same author's *Ten Medieval Studies* (3rd edn, Cambridge, 1930), chap. 7.

77. cf. above, p. 88.

better than heathens'; and in the nineteenth century the impact of organized religion upon the population of the industrial towns was often negligible.⁷⁸ But it was not the pressure of industrialization which created the problem: it had always been there. The Reverend Francis Kilvert recorded in his diary how the vicar of Fordington, Dorset, found total ignorance in his rural parish when he arrived there in the early nineteenth century. At one church in the area there were only two male communicants. When the cup was given to the first he touched his forelock and said, 'Here's your good health, sir.' The second, better informed, said, 'Here's the good health of our Lord Jesus Christ.' At Chippenham a poor man took the chalice from the vicar and wished him a Happy New Year.⁷⁹

Of course, some allowance must be made for the exacting standards of severe divines, quick to denounce as 'heathens' those whom they had merely caught out in a mild state of theological confusion. Richard Hooker may have been right when he observed that there were very few persons by whom God was 'altogether unapprehended' and that they were of such 'grossness of wit' as scarcely to deserve the name of human being.⁸⁰ But a concept of God as vague as this was compatible with all sorts of beliefs of which the Church strongly disapproved. Even the ordinary ecclesiastical rites of passage were sometimes evaded. Confirmation was a formality in many areas, and there were dioceses, like Oxford and Ely in the reign of Elizabeth, where a protracted episcopal vacancy meant that the ceremony lapsed for several decades. When White Kennett visited Rutland as Bishop of Peterborough in 1722 he found there had been no confirmation there for forty years.⁸¹ Some even escaped being christened: in the mid eighteenth century a writer commented on the 'perhaps no inconsiderable number among the lowest class of the people who never are brought to be baptised at all'.⁸²

78. L. Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield* (1876), i, p. 182; K. S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (1963).

79. *Kilvert's Diary*, ed. W. Plomer (new edn, 1960), ii, p. 442; iii, p. 133.

80. R. Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, v. ii.

81. *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester (1696), i, p. 250; J. Strype, *The Life and Acts of John Whitgift* (Oxford, 1822), iii, pp. 288–90; G. V. Bennett, *White Kennett, 1660–1728* (1957), p. 227. For a similar situation in the thirteenth century, see Coulton, *Ten Medieval Studies*, p. 119.

82. *A Collection of the Yearly Bills of Mortality from 1657 to 1758* (1759), p. 4.

4. *Scepticism*

So despite theoretical uniformity there was plenty of scope in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England for a wide degree of religious heterodoxy. The many Elizabethan and Jacobean writers who lamented the growth of 'atheism' used the word loosely and pejoratively to cover any kind of immorality or non-conformity. In so far as they were concerned with actual scepticism they usually had in mind the little group of aristocratic intellectuals who were influenced by classical writings and Paduan Averroism into taking up a deistical posture from which they denied the immortality of the soul, the reality of Heaven and Hell, and sometimes even the divinity of Christ. It is doubtful whether many of these were atheists in the strict sense of the word. They were the counterparts and imitators of the Italian humanists and French *libertins*. But some endorsed the Machiavellian view of religion as a useful device for instilling good behaviour into the common people and denied many orthodox Christian tenets: Christopher Marlowe indeed expressed the view that the New Testament was 'filthily written', that Christ was a bastard and the apostles 'base fellows'. He also anticipated some modern theologians by suggesting that Jesus was a homosexual.⁸³ Sir Walter Raleigh and his friends were said to have denied the reality of Heaven and Hell, declaring that 'we die like beasts and when we are gone there is no more remembrance of us'.⁸⁴ A similar type of outrageous iconoclastic atheism was charged against Thomas Hariot, George Gascoigne, John Caius, Nicholas Bacon, the earl of Oxford and other leading Elizabethan intellectuals. In 1617 the Spanish ambassador estimated the number of English atheists at 900,000.⁸⁵ This figure may be confidently disregarded, but it is clear that under humanist influence some contemporary intellec-

83. P. H. Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe* (Chapel Hill, 1946), chaps. 2 and 3.

84. P. Lefranc, *Sir Walter Raleigh écrivain* (Paris, 1968), p. 381 (and chap. 12 for a thorough discussion of Raleigh's religion).

85. *Correspondence of Matthew Parker*, ed. J. Bruce and T. T. Perowne (Cambridge, P.S., 1853), pp. 251-2; E. A. Strathmann, *Sir Walter Raleigh* (Morningside Heights, 1951), chap. 2; Lefranc, op. cit., p. 341; *C.S.P.D., 1547-80*, p. 444; M. J. Havran, *The Catholics in Caroline England* (Stanford, 1962), p. 83. On this subject in general, see F. Brie, 'Deismus und Atheismus in der Englischen Renaissance', *Anglia*, xlviii (1924); G. T. Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, 1932); D. C. Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea. Scepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1964).

tuals had devised a form of religion which was very different from orthodox Christianity. During the seventeenth century the writings of Hobbes and Spinoza gave this type of scepticism some reinforcement.

Aristocratic infidelity of this kind is well known to historians. But they have paid less attention to the evidence of scepticism among humbler members of the population. One of the most striking features of the spiritual biographies of the time is their revelation that atheistical thoughts could trouble even 'persons of eminent and singular holiness'.⁸⁶ Many future Puritan saints seem to have temporarily doubted the existence of God and the Devil, the reality of Heaven and Hell, and the truthfulness of the Scriptures. This was the case with John Bunyan, Richard Baxter and many other notable believers whose difficulties are only known to us because they were recorded and published so as to help others.⁸⁷ But incidental evidence suggests that such doubts were widely shared. Lady Monson, for example, wife of the well-known Jacobean admiral, was forced to consult an astrologer in 1597, because 'she cannot sleep; she hath many ill thoughts and cogitations; . . . she thinks the Devil doth tempt her to do evil to herself and she doubteth whether there is a God'.⁸⁸

There was nothing new about this tendency to doubt the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Many medieval clergy and laity had been beset by overwhelming temptations to blasphemy and atheism,⁸⁹ and a wide range of popular scepticism was uncovered by the fifteenth century church courts. Much of it has been wrongly

86. R. Gilpin, *Daemonologia Sacra*, ed. A. B. Grosart (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 243.

87. J. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, ed. R. Sharrock (Oxford, 1962), p. 31; G. F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (1965), p. 28; *Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, i, pp. 251-2; *Nicholas Ferrar. Two Lives*, ed. J. E. B. Mayor (Cambridge, 1855), p. 5; H. Jessey, *The Exceeding Riches of Grace Advanced . . . in . . . Mrs Sarah Wight* (2nd edn, 1647), pp. 7, 11-12, 78, 128; T. Taylor, *The Pilgrims Profession* (in *Three Treatises* [1633]), pp. 165-6, 168; Clarke, *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons*, i, pp. 70-1; W. Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1957), p. 99; L. Muggleton, *The Acts of the Witnesses* (1699), p. 18; *Satan his Methods and Malice baffled. A Narrative of God's Gracious Dealings with that Choice Christian Mrs Hannah Allen* (1683), pp. 3, 15, 58.

88. Ashm. 226, f. 233. For similar temptations, below, pp. 565-6.

89. See, e.g., G. G. Coulton, *The Plain Man's Religion in the Middle Ages* (*Medieval Studies*, no. 13, 1916), pp. 6-8.

bracketed by historians under the general title of 'Lollardy'. But it was not Wycliffite or proto-Protestant theology which underlay this reluctance to accept some of the most elementary doctrines of Christianity. Several of these heretics denied the immortality of the soul and the possibility of a future resurrection. One challenged the Biblical account of creation. Some denied the resurrection of Christ.⁹⁰ Others professed a frank indifference, like a London woman accused of practising magic in 1493, who declared that because she had a heaven in this earth she did not care about any heaven in the next world.⁹¹ There were bizarre survivals: a man at Bexley in 1313 made images of wood and stone in his garden and worshipped them as gods, before proceeding to kill his maidservant.⁹² And there were bemused heretics, like the Rutland woman who confessed in 1518 that she had given up going to church and betaken herself to the Devil, as a result of a sudden impulse which she was unable to explain.⁹³

It is impossible to know how representative were the sceptics who appeared before the church courts. The high proportion of aliens and strangers to the district suggests that those most likely to be denounced for religious heterodoxy were the outsiders not fully accepted by the community; like those later accused of witchcraft, they were the persons whose position in society was ambiguous or insecure. If this is true, then the actual volume of disbelief may have been much greater than that which the surviving evidence indicates.

The Reformation did not break the continuity of popular scepticism. Heretics who denied the immortality of the soul, and therefore the existence of Heaven and Hell, were well known in the reign of Edward VI. Both Anabaptists and Familists sympathized with the 'mortalist' doctrine that the soul slept until the Day of Judgment; in 1573 a group of sectaries in the diocese of Ely held that the notion of Hell was purely allegorical.⁹⁴ Doubts were also expressed about the Incarnation. In 1542 an inhabitant of Dartford

90. Thomson, *Later Lollards*, pp. 27, 36-7, 76, 80, 82, 160, 186, 248; id., in *Studies in Church History*, ii, ed. Cuming, p. 255. Thomson's valuable work is marred by a tendency to dismiss unconventional sceptics as 'drunk' or 'of unsound mind', thus missing the tradition to which many of their utterances belonged.

91. Hale, *Precedents*, p. 36.

92. F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury* (1966), p. 312.

93. *An Episcopal Court Book for the Diocese of Lincoln, 1514-20*, ed. M. Bowker (Lincoln Rec. Soc., 1967), pp. 84-5.

94. Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, pp. 29-30, 48-50; *The*

was cited for saying that 'the body of Christ which he received in the womb of the Virgin Mary did not ascend into Heaven nor is not in Heaven'.⁹⁵ Fourteen years later another Kentishman, this time the parson of Tunstall, was accused of saying that whoever believed that Christ sat on the right hand of the Lord was a fool.⁹⁶ In 1576 a 'desperate fellow' in Norfolk went so far as to affirm that there were 'divers Christs'.⁹⁷ Another was presented at Wootton, Gloucestershire, in 1582 for holding repugnant opinions about the manner of Christ's Incarnation.⁹⁸ It was shortly after this time that John Dee's associate, Edward Kelly, was tempted to deny Christ's divinity. Another doubter appeared before Star Chamber in 1596 after declaring that 'Christ was no saviour and the gospel a fable'.⁹⁹

Religious unorthodoxy of this kind could shade off into out-and-out scepticism. At Woodchurch, Kent, in 1573 one Robert Master was charged with erroneous opinions, 'for that he denieth that God made the sun, the moon, the earth, the water, and that he denieth the resurrection of the dead'.¹⁰⁰ The Bishop of Exeter complained in 1600 that in his diocese it was 'a matter very common to dispute whether there be a God or not'; Bancroft encountered similar doubters in the diocese of London.¹⁰¹ In Essex a husband-

Two Liturgies ... Set Forth ... in the Reign of King Edward VI, ed. J. Ketley (Cambridge, P.S., 1844), p. 537; J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation* (Oxford, 1824), ii(i), p. 563; L. Einstein, *Tudor Ideals* (1921), p. 226; C. Hill, 'William Harvey and the Idea of Monarchy', *Past and Present*, xxvii (1964), pp. 62-4; J. Strype, *The Life and Acts of Matthew Parker* (1711), p. 437.

95. Rochester D.R., DRb/Jd 1 (Deposition Books, 1541-71), f. 7.

96. Kent R.O., PRC 39/2, f. 23v. In 1563 Thomas Lovell of Hevingham, Norfolk, was accused of asking why 'we do believe in God the Son, considering we pray to God the Father and not to God the Son; and that God the Son was not believed upon [in] his own country, but driven out; and they [did] better than we do'; Norfolk and Norwich R.O., Norfolk Archdeaconry General Books, 2A (1563). (I owe this reference to Dr R. A. Houlbrooke.)

97. H.M.C., *Hatfield*, ii, p. 136.

98. Gloucester D.R., Vol. 50.

99. M. Casaubon, *A True and Faithful Relation of what passed ... between Dr John Dee ... and Some Spirits* (1659), p. 240; J. Hawarde, *Les Reportes del Cases in Camera Stellata, 1593 to 1609*, ed. W. P. Baildon (1894), pp. 41-2.

100. C. Jenkins, 'An Unpublished Record of Archbishop Parker's Visitation in 1573', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, xxix (1911), p. 314.

101. H.M.C., *Hatfield*, x, p. 450; J. Swan, *A True and Breife Report of Mary Glovers Vexation* (1603), p. 68.

man of Bradwell-near-the-Sea was said to 'hold his opinion that all things cometh by nature, and does affirm this as an atheist'.¹⁰² In Worcestershire in 1616 Thomas Aston of Ribsford-with-Bewdley was said to have remarked that 'stage plays were made by the Holy Ghost and the word of God was but man's invention'.¹⁰³ At Wing, Rutland, in 1633 Richard Sharpe was accused of saying 'there is no God and that he hath no soul to save'.¹⁰⁴ From Durham in 1635 came the case of Brian Walker who, when asked if he did not fear God, retorted that, 'I do not believe there is either God or Devil; neither will I believe anything but what I see': as an alternative to the Bible he commended 'the book called Chaucer'.¹⁰⁵ Many less assertive sceptics had doubts about the existence of divine providence: William Gardiner, a prominent Elizabethan Surrey J.P., was accused in 1582 of saying 'that God hath nothing to do with the world since he created it, and that the world was not governed by him'.¹⁰⁶

The relative freedom of the Interregnum brought much of this endemic scepticism into the open.¹⁰⁷ In 1648 the authors of the Blasphemy Ordinance of that year found it necessary to prescribe punishments for those who denied immortality, cast doubt on the Scriptures, rejected Christ and the Holy Ghost, and even denied that there was a God or that he was almighty.¹⁰⁸ Some of these heresies found a refuge among the sects. The Socinians denied the divinity of Christ. The Ranters denied the immortality of the soul, the literalness of the Resurrection, the overriding authority of the Scriptures, and the physical existence of Heaven and Hell. Like the Familists, they still used such concepts, but chose to treat them symbolically: Heaven was when men laughed, ran one version, Hell when they were in pain. There was no Hell, save in man's imagina-

102. Cited by Sister Mary Catherine in *Essex Recusant*, viii (1966), p. 92 (no date given).

103. Hereford D.R., Court Book 70.

104. Peterborough D.R., Correction Book 65 (1633-5), f. 75v.

105. *Durham High Commission*, pp. 115-16.

106. L. Hotson, *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931), pp. 55, 198, 202. cf. W. R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (San Marino, Calif., 1966), p. 19; Wood, *Ath. Ox.*, iii, cols. 8-9; J. Flavell, *Divine Conduct: or, the Myserie of Providence* (1678), sig. A5.

107. On this whole subject, see now C. Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) and A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters* (1970).

108. *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-60*, ed. C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait (1911), i, pp. 1133-6.

tion, Richard Coppin was alleged to have said: 'Whilst we live in the fear of Hell we have it'.¹⁰⁹ The Digger Gerrard Winstanley scoffed at the notion of an 'outward heaven, which is a fancy your false teachers put into your heads to please you with while they pick your purses'. In the later seventeenth century many intellectuals were to reject the doctrine that the wicked suffered perpetual torment, but it was the mystical sects of the Interregnum who had done most to publicize such scepticism.¹¹⁰

Ultimately, such heresies could lead to the formal rejection of all religion. The Ranter Laurence Clarkson came to believe that there was no god but nature; so did one of the followers of the prophet William Franklin. Lodowick Muggleton said he had met many persons who held this view.¹¹¹ In 1656 two Lacock weavers were charged with a variety of heretical beliefs ranging from star-worship to the assertion that, 'if the Scriptures were a-making again, Tom Lampire of Melksham would make as good Scripture as the Bible'. They also said that 'there was neither Heaven nor Hell but in a man's own conscience; for if he had a good fortune and did live well in the world that was Heaven; and if he lived poor and miserable that was Hell and death itself, for then he would die like a cow or a horse'. One of them combined the Antinomian doctrine 'that God was in all things and that whatever sins or wickedness he did commit, God was the author of them all and acted them in him', with the reflection that he would sell all religions for a jug of beer.¹¹²

When assessing such utterances it must be remembered that for most of this period religious unorthodoxy was still regarded as an extremely serious offence, not least because a belief in Heaven and Hell was thought an indispensable sanction for good behaviour by the lower classes. Between 1548 and 1612 at least eight persons were burned at the stake for holding anti-Trinitarian beliefs. Of these the ploughwright Matthew Hamont, who was burned at Norwich in 1578, combined his denial of Christ's divinity and resurrection with the reflection that the New Testament was 'but mere

109. *C.S.P.D.*, 1648-9, p. 425; Coppin, *Truth's Testimony*, pp. 40-41. For Ranter doctrine, see Morton, *The World of the Ranters*, and Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*.

110. D. W. Petegorsky, *Left-wing Democracy in the English Civil War* (1940), p. 144; D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (1964).

111. H. Ellis, *Pseudochristus* (1650), pp. 32, 37; Muggleton, *The Acts of the Witnesses*, p. 19. For Clarkson, below, p. 567.

112. *H.M.C., Various Collections*, i, pp. 132-3. cf. below, pp. 457-8.

foolishness, a story of men, or rather a mere fable'.¹¹³ Those who gave vent to such sentiments ran serious risks, even after 1612, for some of the Laudian bishops regretted the cessation of such executions: Archbishop Neile wanted to burn a heretic as late as 1639;¹¹⁴ and Hobbes feared that he might undergo this fate after the Restoration.¹¹⁵ Only in 1677 was the punishment for heresy reduced from death by burning to mere excommunication. Against this background the evidence of widespread religious scepticism is not to be underrated, for it may be reasonably surmised that many thought what they dared not say aloud. It is not surprising that in the reign of Charles II, Dudley, the fourth Lord North, came to the view that the number of contemporaries who believed in life after death was very small, 'especially among the vulgar'.¹¹⁶

To this self-conscious rejection of religious dogma must be added the incalculable forces of worldliness and apathy. One historian has called the Elizabethan period 'the age of greatest religious indifference before the twentieth century',¹¹⁷ and although this may seem an exaggeration it is certain that a substantial proportion of the population regarded organized religion with an attitude which varied from cold indifference to frank hostility. The church courts uncovered only the more blatant offenders: like the two inhabitants of Cheshire in 1598 who said that they would give money to pull the parish church down, but none to build it up; the butcher in the diocese of Ely in 1608 who set his dog on the people as they went to church; the London actor who said that a man might learn more good at one of his plays than at twenty sermons.¹¹⁸ But there were

113. H. J. MacLachan, *Socinianism in Seventeenth-century England* (Oxford, 1951), p. 31; J. Stow, *The Annales of England* (1592), pp. 1173-4; Buckley, *Atheism in the English Renaissance*, pp. 56-8.

114. L. O. Pike, *A History of Crime in England* (1873-6), ii, p. 125; *C.S.P.D.*, 1639, pp. 455-6. A heretic was condemned but subsequently reprieved in 1618; *C.S.P.D.*, 1611-18, pp. 522, 525, 526, 527.

115. J. Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. A. Powell (1949), p. 245.

116. *D.N.B.*, 'North, Dudley, 4th Baron North'.

117. L. Stone in *E.H.R.*, lxxvii (1962), p. 328. Similar opinions may be found in R. G. Usher, *The Reconstruction of the English Church* (New York, 1910), i, p. 281; M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Gloucester, Mass., 1963), p. 380.

118. 'The Bishop of Chester's Visitation for the year 1598', *The Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd ser., i (1896), p. 69; Ely D.R., B 2/26, f. 133; F. W. X. Fincham, 'Notes from the Ecclesiastical Court Records at Somerset House', *T.R.H.S.*, 4th ser., iv (1921), p. 138.

innumerable men and women who chose to concentrate on the business of living and to let spiritual matters look after themselves; like the Hereford money-lender, who, when urged to give over 'his lewd life and detestable usury for his soul's sake', replied: 'What pass I for my soul? Let me have money enough [and] I care not whether God or the Devil have my soul.'¹¹⁹

The growth of secularism is not a topic which has received much systematic historical investigation.¹²⁰ These authorities who have considered it have tended to pursue the analysis of the sociologist, Emile Durkheim, to its logical conclusion. If it is by religious ritual that society affirms its collective unity, they argue, then the decline of that ritual reflects the disappearance of that unity. The break-up of shared values, consequent upon the growth of urbanism and industrialism, makes such collective affirmations increasingly difficult. This disintegration became apparent with the formation of rival religious groups after the Reformation. It was completed when the Industrial Revolution further dissolved the moral unity of English society. Norms which had previously seemed God-given henceforth appeared as mere rules of utility needing adaptation in the face of changing circumstances. In the country villages, where some moral unity survived, it was possible for organized religion to retain some social meaning. But in the cities religious indifference became most marked, because it was there that society's moral unity had most obviously been broken.¹²¹

This conventional interpretation undoubtedly exaggerates the moral unity of medieval society. Durkheim himself romanticized the Middle Ages as a time when men were cosily bound to each other in little units of manor, village and gild; and similar idealization has affected the work of unhistorically minded sociologists. Indeed the whole problem may be wrongly posed. We do not know enough about the religious beliefs and practices of our remote ancestors to be certain of the extent to which religious faith and

119. *Hereford City Records*, ix, f. 3438.

120. cf. C. Geertz in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. M. Banton (1966), p. 43: 'If the anthropological study of religious commitment is underdeveloped, the anthropological study of religious non-commitment is non-existent.'

121. For a consideration of such arguments, see B. R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (1966), part 1, and A. Macintyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (1967).

practice have actually declined. Not enough justice has been done to the volume of apathy, heterodoxy and agnosticism which existed long before the onset of industrialism. Even the most primitive societies have their religious sceptics.¹²² It may be that social changes increased the volume of scepticism in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. What is clear is that the hold of organized religion upon the people was never so complete as to leave no room for rival systems of belief.

122. cf. P. Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (New York, 1927), chap. xix.

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