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2.
The Protestant Town

I

If this chapter, like a sermon, required a text, it could be supplied from Psalm 122: 'Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity in itself' (in the words of the English Psalter) or (as the Geneva Bible [1560] has it) 'that is compact together in itself'. The force of the original Hebrew depicts the crowded, even slumlike character of the city, as if it were the 'Great Wen' of London of which King James I and William Cobbett in their generations complained, or some human catastrophe of the modern Third World. It is indicative of the positive evaluation of civic life in early modern Europe that the translators and exegetes of Psalm 122 altered this meaning to celebrate the city as embodying a dreamlike model of human society in a state of perfection, while implying that the condition of realising such perfection was the moral resource of principled consensus.

Not only this text but also the frequent attention paid in Scripture to Jerusalem, the embodiment of the people of Israel in an especially intensified and apprehensible form, encouraged townspeople, who were in any case disposed to take themselves seriously, to suppose that their own civic community was possessed of ideal and admirable qualities. This town, our city, is to be compared, even identified, with God's own metropolis of Jerusalem. So it was with many a town and city in Reformation Europe. Medieval towns and the social groups and divisions which they contained shared many patrons. In Canterbury St Thomas competed with St George. There were implied ideological distinctions between the proud prelate who had died defending the liberties of the Church against the Crown and England's ghostly champion who had secured victories for her kings in the field. One could choose between one and another idealised personification of the city's identity. Or perhaps the choice would be made for the citizen, by the parish in which he was born and baptised or the fraternity to which he was committed in membership. But now there was but one patron, God.

Like other ideas and institutions explored in this book, the idealised identification of the city – almost any city – with Jerusalem was not a totally novel consequence of the Protestant Reformation. When King Richard II was reconciled with the city of London in 1392 the accompanying pageantry proclaimed that it was with a new manifestation of Jerusalem that this successor (or impersonator) of Jesus Christ came to terms. A late fifteenth-century town clerk of Bristol, Robert Ricart, drew a map of his city which represented it as 'the navel of the world', a cross within a circle, representing a heavenly Jerusalem divided into four quarters defined by its four principal streets: a little model of the world. (Would Ricart have been as scandalised as orthodox Christians of the 1650s when the Quaker James Nayler made his 'blasphemous' entry into Bristol, seated like Christ on Palm Sunday on a donkey, a parody of such civic traditions?) The saints who served as patrons of the medieval civic community represented it in heavenly intercessions which imparted to the social body a holy distinction, making it a 'microcosm of the world' in its harmonious wholeness. But this wholeness was – or should have been – greatly enhanced by the substitution of a single God for a whole panoply of proprietary saints. For the city now stood before God, the one, as a seamless whole, containing no rival loyalties to various sub-deities, no rival jurisdictions, no religious liberties or enclaves which were no-go areas for the civic authorities. 'Now the command of the Mayor and his brethren was efficacious in every quarter of the city, and every inhabitant, burgess or stranger, was equally subject to their rule.'#1

And for God there was only one city, Jerusalem. Even if a passing interest was taken in Nineveh, this was not so much for Nineveh's sake as to teach Jerusalem a lesson, through the fable of the prophet Jonah. In the New Testament God's Apostle, St Paul, travelled the length of the Eastern Mediterranean, but when he communicated by letter with the cities which he had visited it was to the Christians in the cities, not to the cities themselves, that he wrote. As strangers and pilgrims Christians had here no continuing city. And when in the Book of Revelation St John the Divine wrote to the seven churches which were in Asia they were located in famous cities, but it was not to the cities that he conveyed the message of the Spirit. There was only one Jerusalem. But now there were many Christian cities for which Jerusalem stood as model and paradigm, and for Englishmen Jerusalem was naturally London. Delivering his first sermon as Bishop of London at the great open-air preaching place of Paul's Cross, Edwin Sandys exclaimed: 'Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, ... casting his eyes toward the city of Jerusalem, bewailed the lamentable estate thereof, and that with tears. The like effect ... I find in myself, beholding this Jerusalem of ours, this famous city.' Another preacher in the same place echoed the bishop: 'Our Saviour Christ, if he were here, should be moved to weep over England as he hath wept over Jerusalem'. In fact it was to become a vulgar commonplace. A ballad-monger joins in:

> O London, London, Jerusalem I may thee call,
> For why? thy conversation agreeth thereto now:
> They would take no warning before the plague did fall
> And at this present day O LONDON no more dost thou.

A Jacobean preacher coming out of Kent to a prominent London pulpit spoke of the city as 'the very ark of the presence of God, above all other places of this land'. 'Oh London, London, excellent things are spoken of thee, thou city of God.'#2

If London was Jerusalem, Canterbury, according to the Jacobean preacher James Cleland, was Sychar, the Judean city where the patriarch Jacob (in his very name the precursor of King James) had sunk a famous well, and where Jesus converted the Samaritan woman. For Archbishop Abbot 'on his second coming into Kent' had made a well, or conduit, in Canterbury, a city 'builded in the sweetest air, between two little hills, . . . in the best place of the chiefest shire of this country, even in Canterbury, the Metropolis or Head Town of Kent, if not of all England'.#3

Thither, we read elsewhere in the Psalms, the tribes go up. So a related theme was that of the city set on a hill, either Jerusalem as the crown of the hill country of Judea, or that city of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 5:14, 'A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid'. Colchester in the 1550s was so regarded: 'The ancient and famous city of Colchester . . . became like unto the city upon a hill; or a candle upon a candlestick'. Colchester is indeed sited on a steep hill, which may have made the identification more plausible. And so was Rye, in Sussex. A hundred years after Colchester had discovered itself in the Gospel, Rye's inhabitants were told (in 1652): 'You are as a city set on an hill, labour to hold forth an holy life, lest it be said what do you more than others?' But Gloucester too, for all its level, riverain topography, was equally identified with the biblical motif, as were several towns of the

West Riding of Yorkshire and, most famously of all, Boston in Massachusetts. Boston's several hills numbered something less than seven, which was an undesirable number, suggesting another city altogether: Rome, successor to the biblical Babylon, or Babel.

These paradigms served to reinforce civic identity and to foster a sense of civic pride. But as explored by any preacher less flagrantly flattering than Cleland they also nourished a critical mood of moral responsibility, in the spirit of the text which teaches that from those to whom much has been given, much shall be required. Judgment was pronounced in the manner of those Old Testament prophets (the words are Jeremiah's) who had uttered *against* the city, in the name of the Lord: 'For Jerusalem's sake I will not hold my peace'. Even the flatterer Cleland, remembering that 'harlot' Jerusalem and 'bloody Nineveh', not to speak of Mahomet at Constantinople and Antichrist at Rome, thought that 'the great sins' ordinarily had their origin in the city, 'from hence derived to the country'. Londoners were warned that God had not dealt so favourably with any city, Jerusalem only excepted, and no city so sinful. If God had not spared Jerusalem, his own, but had suffered it to be repeatedly devastated, its inhabitants put to the sword or carried into exile, why should he turn a deaf ear to the crying sins of London? However to prophesy in this sense against Jerusalem was not the same thing as for Jonah to prophesy against Nineveh in the hope of converting and redeeming that great but heathen city; still less to preach against Babylon, which was the antitype of Jerusalem, inherently corrupt, utterly irredeemable. Babylon's fate was already sealed and certain. Elizabethans took comfort from the reverberating reiteration of God's sentence: 'Babylon, which is Rome, is fallen, according to the prophecy of this angel. *She is fallen*, saith the angel, *she is fallen*' (Revelation 14:8).#5

To return to Psalm 1:22, Jerusalem is here described as a city the principles of whose foundation and construction embody civic harmony and wholeness: 'that is at unity in itself', or 'compact together in itself'. The Geneva Bible supplies this marginal comment: 'By the artificial joining and beauty of the houses, he meaneth the concord and love that was between the citizens'. That was the great urban myth of late medieval Europe which the sixteenth century, and especially the Protestant Reformation among other considerable changes of that century, hardened and somewhat stridently reinforced – even as it dealt a death-blow to the actuality of that unity, by dividing along lines of formal religious division communities which were previously at least nominally at one, and perhaps by distracting them in other ways. For the alteration in religion was accompanied by and interacted with other social changes which tended to accentuate the distance between classes, while making it more difficult for those distances to be bridged and for tensions to be expressed, contained and surmounted by ceremonies and rituals.

So there is a paradox at the heart of this subject. In the history of English towns, according to a prevalent ideology, a series of events, or a process, which we call the Reformation was ostensibly a means of promoting such social success and wholeness as had never been known before, while on the national scale it affirmed the unitary and uniting authority of the one godly prince over the godly commonwealth of England, the type or paradigm of which was Israel. But in truth the immediate effect was separation and confusion. The contradiction is acknowledged in one of the official Homilies of the post-Reformation Church, 'A Sermon Against Contention and Brawling', which complains of 'these words of contention which be now almost in every man's mouth – "He is a Pharisee, he is a Gospeller, he is of the new sort, he is of the old faith, he is a new-broached brother, he is a good catholic father, he is a papist, he is an heretic." O how the Church is divided! O how the cities be cut and mangled! O how the coat of Christ that was without seam is all to rent and torn!' And so it was in Canterbury in 1543. The old-fashioned complained of the new-fashioned as 'newfangles' and assailed them as 'you fellows of the new trickery, that go up and down with your testaments in your hands!' Soon such people would be stigmatised as 'Puritans'. They gave as good as they got, denouncing religious conservatives as 'pope-holy knaves'.#6 The Homily comments: 'They be unworthy to live in a Commonwealth, the which do as much as lieth in them, with brawling and scolding, to disturb the quietness and peace of the same'. Was such 'brawling and scolding' really new, or did it now break out on an unprecedented scale? The Homily seems to confront an unprecedented threat to the harmony which the parish was supposed to embody. Had unity ever been demanded more stridently and peremptorily in printed and spoken word? Never.

II

'The Reformation in the English Towns' makes a modest, low-profile, Hobbitish sort of subject by comparison with the altogether grander theme of 'The Reformation in the Imperial German Cities', just as those English towns were themselves small-scale Toytowns and Trumptons when compared with Nuremberg, Augsburg, Cologne or Erfurt, the German Rome. Italian visitors reported that in all England there was only one town worthy of the name: London, which in the sixteenth century was busily doubling its population every fifty years, from 50 000 in 1500 to 100 000 in 1550 and 200 000 by the end of the century. This was a prodigious phenomenon, more startling for the sixteenth century, which had known nothing like it, than for our own. No provincial town before 1600 had as many as 20 000 inhabitants and only ten had more than 7000. In Europe there were forty-two cities with populations exceeding 40 000, in England none, London excepted. Out of 600 or 700 English towns, fully 500 were so small as to prompt the modern mind to question what it was about these little places – Abingdon, Burford, Congleton, Dunster, Evesham, Faversham, Godmanchester, Harwich – which was distinctively *urban*. Only about a hundred would today rank as towns at all, most of them places of 2000 to 4000 inhabitants. Exeter was the fifth city of the kingdom, yet the area enclosed by its walls measured just 93 acres. We are dealing with a time when Canterbury, with about 4000 inhabitants, was seventh in ranking order of English towns in terms of its tax yield, and when the population of Sandwich was perhaps 2000 and that of Faversham no more than 1000.#7

Unlike Germany's prouder cities, English towns were lacking in political clout. To be sure they were represented, even over--represented, in Parliament, where 'burgesses' greatly outnumbered knights of the shire. But for the most part these so-called burgesses were not bona-fide townsmen, but carpet-bagging gentry who owed their seats among other favourable factors to the patronage of the territorial magnates who were the equivalents of Trollope's Duke of Omnium, and who were able to find their own expenses, thus saving the money of the constituencies which they represented. The minority of genuine burgesses at Westminster must have felt increasingly out of place in the gentlemen's club which the House of Commons had become, their speeches unremarked by parliamentary diarists. And the town which dared to refuse its patron the nomination of at least one of its representatives risked a stern rebuke such as the corporation of Denbigh received from the Elizabethan Earl of Leicester: 'Be ye well assured never to look for any friendship or favour at my hands in any of your affairs hereafter'. Sir John Gray told the civic fathers of Leicester: 'If you are able to cross me in one thing, I can requite your town with twenty'.#8 Consequently towns were eager to curry favour with tactful gifts of sugar loaves or tuns of claret, as well as with political favours. In 1568, when seventeen killer whales swam up the Orwell to Ipswich and stranded, they were at once cut up and the massive chunks of reeking flesh despatched on carts to those courtiers and noblemen to whom the town was in any way beholden. It was the thought which counted.#9

So far the argument has tended to confirm the bald and discouraging statement by the lawyer, politician and political theorist Sir Thomas Smith that 'generally in the shires' citizens and burgesses were 'of no account'. However this was not the whole story of the politics of town and country in Tudor England. The goodwill of a town was worth cultivating, whatever Smith might snobbishly say. Not even the wealthiest and most 'worshipful' town would quarrel with its neighbouring gentry, if conflict could be avoided. And even the

poorest and most contemptible could be jealous in defence of its liberties and resourceful in the use of the law to that end. Ipswich regularly retained two attorneys in the London courts, one of whom advised the bailiffs: 'You have no walls nor bulwarks, no gates by strength to defend your town, but your town standeth and resteth to be defended by the maintenance, preserving and well keeping of your liberties, franchises and customs'.

Diarmaid MacCulloch has shown that in East Anglia these guardians of a town's material interests were under increasing threat as the sixteenth century progressed. For in many a Suffolk town the gentry were now the enemy, or at least the irritant, within the gates. With the dissolution of the monastic houses much desirable urban property had passed into the hands of new proprietors, and the new owners laid claim to the legal privileges and powers of the former monastic inmates. In early Elizabethan Ipswich one such interloper, Peter Withipoll, was busily constructing the prestigious mansion of Christchurch House on the site of the former priory of the Holy Trinity. His continual provocation of the town led to a series of law suits, including the inevitable set-piece confrontation in Star Chamber. Ipswich could afford to fight Withipoll and had to, since he threatened to purchase the fee-farm of the town, 'for then he should rule'. But the legal battle between little Beccles and the gentry family of Rede over the management of the town common of Beccles Fen lasted for fifty costly years and ended, insofar as such things ever do end, in victory for the townspeople. So, apparently, ended all these disputes, through sheer importunity and persistence, but in the case of Beccles this was not without the assistance of other, more powerful county gentry. Elsewhere, at Faversham in Kent, the differences between the town and the new owner of Faversham Abbey, Thomas Arden, had a quicker, neater conclusion. Arden was murdered, and the crime was later the subject of a sensational Elizabethan drama.#10

This was one not inconsiderable consequence of the secularising process of the Reformation for many towns. But for the dissolution of the monasteries, Arden would not have made himself so fatally unpopular in Faversham and the inhabitants of Ipswich would not have had their newly-paved streets ruined by the water escaping from Peter Withipoll's hydraulic experiments with the fishponds of Christchurch Park. But how important otherwise was the Protestant Reformation in the historical timescape of the early modern English town? The history of the German Reformation has been dominated by the cities, and the history of the cities by the Reformation. Recently there has been some reaction against the paramountcy traditionally accorded to religion in describing the civic politics and life of the world of Wagner's *Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, that is if religion can be considered to be a more or less independent, irreducible factor. Erfurt, where Martin Luther was educated, was a community coping with an excess of economic problems and political difficulties, as local trades and industries contracted and even collapsed, and as the city conducted both a foreign war against the centralising regional government and a civil war between its own competing classes and factions. The religious issues posed by the Lutheran preachers proved to be just one more worm in a can of wriggling worms, another spoke of the wheel rather than the hub. It would be a mistake to write the history of sixteenth-century Erfurt as if it simply consisted of the reception of the Protestant Reformation.#11

By contrast the history of the early modern English town, which has been made a popular subject in social and regional history by such distinguished historians as Peter Clark, Paul Slack and Charles Phythian-Adams, not to speak of the interest of the Open University, has suffered from a reverse tendency. The religious upheaval of the Reformation receives due mention but in the integration of the subject it remains peripheral, one topic among several. The reason seems to be that social history is commonly understood as the application of economics to every aspect of communal, shared existence: thus the dominant theme in the literature is *urban decay*, the fact that in the sixteenth century the majority of ancient, well-established urban settlements found themselves stuck in a longstanding economic bind of declining industry, receding commerce and demographic contraction. These factors are assumed to have been at the root of everything else discussible which was happening to urban politics, religion and culture, in themselves explaining, or going far towards explaining, the Reformation itself. Professor Clark looks instinctively in this direction to account for the fact that early seventeenth-century Gloucester was puritan in religion and fought against the king in the Civil War.#12

Admittedly urban decay has not been invented by economic historians and vaguely Marxist social analysts. It was as much a fact then as it is, on a vastly greater scale, now, in what were once Britain's major manufacturing centres. In the sixteenth century textiles had moved to the countryside as surely as electronics have now migrated to the vales of Berkshire or to the slopes of South Cambridgeshire. In the towns, as wealth dwindled, it became progressively more difficult to maintain urban amenities and even urban government. The traditional and costly trappings were neglected (as in Professor Phythian-Adams's Coventry) and it was no longer easy to persuade individuals of the appropriate status to assume the expensive burdens of civic office. This was not universally the case but it was the experience of Canterbury, where it was said in 1523 that 'divers aldermen and commoners . . . of late have departed out of the said city to the utter undoing of the same'.#13

But this was neither the whole story of sixteenth-century towns nor even, necessarily, the bedrock to which all other events and circumstances can be reduced. It will somewhat redress the historiographical balance if we insist that the Reformation was much more than a sideshow: that it was as central to the urban history of the period as religious change has traditionally been to the national history of England under the Tudors.

III

The Reformation can be discussed as something which affected the towns, being in its widest sense a profound and extensive revolution altering much for ever. We shall come to that. But before we consider what the Reformation did for the towns, it is proper to ask what the towns did for the Reformation. Was it the towns which converted a reluctant countryside and turned seventeenth-century England into a (largely) protestant nation?

The answer is a guarded yes. It would be wrong to call the Reformation an urban phenomenon and leave it at that. By the same token it would not be sufficient to call it a revolution of youth, or an episode in female assertion and emancipation, although both these social dimensions of the movement attract attention. The secularising operations of the Reformation greatly increased the ecclesiastical patronage of the landed gentry and this, together with the wealth and general desirability of many of the parishes which the gentry now controlled, meant that, as members of the governing class were attracted to the new religion, so protestant preachers fresh from university were 'planted' more or less randomly in rural locations, where there was not necessarily any general desire to have them. So it was that John Bland, a fiery and quarrelsome ex-monk from the far north-west, found himself in Adisham, a deeply rural parish of East Kent, where he soon had more enemies than friends (which helped in due course to bring him to the stake). However he made it the base for an effective roving apostolate which took him to many other places, including the small towns of the region.#14

But in many towns there was a protestant constituency, the nucleus of an audience for John Bland and his ilk. This was often small at first, but sufficient to create cells and a following for the new tendency, which was caustically critical of the old ways, in the tradition of the long-established Lollard heresy. It attacked pilgrimage, confession, the Mass itself, and sustained itself by bible-reading, at first quietly and unobtrusively in conventicles, but presently noisily and with deliberate provocation at the west end of the church. So it was in the Canterbury parish of Northgate, a poor quarter but with a few richer inhabitants, where John Toftes, a lawyer and 'common maintainer, supporter and harbourer of persons accused of heresies', openly in church and with a loud voice read the Bible in English to an audience

consisting of his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, and the parish midwife – and this was at the height of the late Henrician religious reaction, when bible-reading was restricted and a conservative code of religious practice enforced under the Act of Six Articles. This practice remained an emotive symbol of something like religious insurrection for the quarter-century it took to win the main struggle of the initial Reformation. At Deal a group of laymen which included a thirty-two year old soldier from a neighbouring garrison were 'discouraged' by the parson from reading the Scripture amongst themselves in English, 'saying . . . you ought not to read it, it doth pass your capacity'. At Rye the protestant faction was conspicuous by the 1530s, bound by close ties of friendship, kinship and marriage, a group in the ascendant in the economy and politics of the port town. At Colchester it was said that 'this town is a harbourer of heretics and ever was'. Yet it was not until the 1540s that Protestantism made any real headway in Colchester and Protestants were still a minority sub-culture even at the end of Edward's reign.#15

Mrs Toftes of Northgate, Canterbury, declared that church images were 'devils and idols' and boasted that her daughter could 'piss as good holy water as the priests could make any'. And Christopher Levins, another prosperous parishioner and the town clerk, pulled down the images in the churches of St Mary's Northgate and St Peter's and burned in his own house the bones of St Blaise which had been brought to Canterbury early in the tenth century, the earliest of its relics, and under whose shrine Becket had died. But twenty years later, in early Elizabethan days, with Protestantism legally but barely established, willing adherence to a religion of bible-reading and sermons was still an acquired taste in Canterbury, and a taste which few seem to have acquired. When three neighbours went to hear a sermon on a certain Sunday afternoon and later retired to the Fleur de Lys to drink a pot of beer, the rest of the company in the bar asked them: 'Where have you been you three good husbands, not at the sermon I trust?"#16

But before long some East Anglian towns, Colchester, Ipswich and soon Bury St Edmunds, became organised centres of early and precocious reform, supporting protestant plays and printing presses as well as bible-reading and Sunday afternoon sermons. Colchester in the years of the Marian reaction and persecution was not only a city set on a hill but a Mecca whither, we are told, people resorted for the comfort of their consciences 'and repairing to the common inns, had by night their Christian exercises' – leading A.G. Dickens to remark that if the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the English Reformation was secured in the pubs of Colchester.#17

London was the most important of original protestant centres. As early as the 1530s the social spectrum of the unorthodox was wide, extending from the Whitechapel bricklayer who preached regularly in his garden and was said to have declared Scripture as well as if he had studied at the universities to members of the city's merchant aristocracy, the Mercers and Merchant Adventurers and, conspicuously, their wives and daughters. In so far as the Reformation Parliament, which from 1529 followed a governmental lead in attacks on ecclesiastical interests, was motivated by real rather than synthetic anticlericalism, this seems to have been the anticlericalism of London's merchant princes and lawyers. The familiar homespun preaching of Hugh Latimer, bitterly critical of the church hierarchy, was heard by five or six thousand at a time. It was said: 'Latimer many blameth and as many doth allow'. So London, if not yet a protestant city, was more or less evenly divided for and against religious change, which in itself indicates some measure of mass support for reform.#18

At Bristol there was a preaching contest between Latimer and an unreconstructed preaching friar of the old school called Hubberdyne, 'a great strayer about the realm in all quarters' whose sermons consisted of 'tales and fables, dialogues and dreams' enlivened by hops, leaps and other histrionic gestures. This caused some excitement, until Hubberdyne's antics broke the floor of the pulpit and caused gangrenous injuries to which the defender of catholic orthodoxy presently succumbed, leaving the churchwardens to plead that they had built their pulpit for preaching, not for dancing.#19

Although Latimer was said to have 'sorely infected' Bristol, the 'good catholic people' of the town deplored his doctrine. It would be a mistake to suppose that a majority of the population either in London or in provincial towns consisted of enthusiastic protestant converts and critics of the old church. If the Canterbury parish of St Mary's Northgate contained the fiercely iconoclastic Toftes family, it was also frequented by more conventional parishioners who reacted to thunderstorms by rushing to church to fetch the holy water which Mrs Toftes despised, casting it about their houses to drive away evil spirits and devils. Not far away, in the village of Herne, the parish sexton thought that the Devil had no power to come near holy water, holy bread or hallowed bells. But he had heard his elders say that whenever a rumbling was heard in church that presaged a death. And, sure enough, when he slept in the church one Christmastime and heard thunder he was able to assure the curate 'that there should be a corpse shortly' – which for him was presumably good news, since a grave would have to be dug.#20 These were some of the old ways in religion. In Canterbury there were still, in the 1540s, plenty of conservative priests to tell their people that Protestants were like the man who, hopelessly lost, was told: 'You be clear out of the way and must turn back again where you left'. Many had not turned aside. In Elizabethan Hull 'certain disordered persons' maintained the old and 'popish' custom of ringing the church bells on the night of All Saints Day, until the mayor and a posse descended on the church to disperse them.#21

Much recent research suggests that the bulk of the population was conventionally but also actively pious in orthodox religious practice for as long as it was legal and feasible to be orthodox: that is, until the Reformation was made official. Popular anticlericalism may have been a paper tiger. When Henry VIII swung the Church back to a conservatively defined Catholicism in the early 1540s, the city authorities in London clamped down on the hardcore protestant population, those who despised holy bread and holy water, read the Bible in church and were anticlerical and iconoclastic. This led to the arrest and temporary detention of five hundred people, less than one per cent of the population.#22

There is much that is unbalanced in Professor J. J. Scarisbrick's book *The Reformation and the English People*. Yet it is hard to disagree with its second sentence: 'On the whole, English men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came'. He must mean 'most English men and women for Protestants did exist and should not be discounted. However all historians, Scarisbrick not excluded, remain puzzled about the readiness with which these 'most' people abandoned religious habits which seem to have been meaningful and dear to them, simply at the behest of the government. Late medieval Catholicism has been called a cult celebrated by the living on behalf of the dead. No religious exhortation was commoner than that inscribed on innumerable funerary brasses: 'Pray for my soul and for all Christian souls'. If you really did believe that your grandmother was suffering in purgatory and that prayers and masses could shorten and alleviate her pains, you might be expected to have made more of a fuss when it became impractical and (in effect) illegal to pay for this service. A modern parallel might be the enforced closure, without compensation, of all hospices for the terminally ill, with the proceeds used to give members of the Cabinet a hefty pay rise.#23

Such questions have to be lived with and cannot easily be resolved. As the alteration of religion became official and general it was more often than not the towns which became centres of more than a merely formal and nominal Protestantism and centres of regional evangelism. In the early Elizabethan decades Leicester, Norwich, Kings Lynn, Northampton, Hull all assumed the role of cities set on their respective hills. A generation later the West Riding joined in. In 1538 an early northern Protestant had complained that 'Rotheram, Doncaster, Pontefract, Wakefield, Leeds, Bradford, Halifax, Manchester and many others have not one faithful pastor . . . Newcastle and the country round is also destitute of good pastors.' Within a hundred years (and it took almost that long) all these towns became famous protestant preaching centres, and Newcastle had transformed the civilisation of its hinterland in Durham and Northumberland, indeed had introduced into that region for the first time what the Elizabethans could recognise as civilisation.#24

How had it happened? Not by accident, or by osmosis. Urban parishes were typically small and poorly endowed. In Ipswich and Colchester few could support even a humdrum curate without supplementation. So well-qualified graduate preachers would not appear on the scene as a matter of course, and without special efforts to attract them. Conversely, where the Church was still powerful and wealthily entrenched, towns and especially cathedral cities could remain bastions of religious conservatism far into the new age. This was conspicuously true of York, where there were six hundred priests at the time of the Reformation (six to eight per cent of the city's entire population!) and where religion of a traditional kind still enjoyed the active and generous support of the merchant class. A year after the first protestant Prayer Book came into use in 1549 a vicar choral of the Minster made a traditionally catholic will in which he bequeathed his soul to God, 'our blessed Lady and to all the celestial company of Heaven'. Six months after the Elizabethan Settlement a York canon declared boldly that he was 'pretending [that is to say, claiming] to die in the catholic faith, desiring all saints to pray for me'. Some years later still no objection was made to entering in the archbishop's register the will of a parish priest who bequeathed his soul to 'our blessed Lady, Saint Mary, and to all the holy company of Heaven'. When radical change came it grew not from the roots but by imposition from above, with the arrival on the scene of earnest reformers as a Dean of York (Matthew Hutton, 1567), an Archbishop (Edmund Grindal, 1570) and a Lord President of the Council in the North (the Earl of Huntingdon, 1572).[25] Canterbury, too, remained somewhat backward in religion, the sort of town where a backlash in favour of traditional ways was possible as late as 1647, when a riot in support of Christmas helped to usher in the second Civil War.

But in so far as leading townsmen were sympathetic to the new religion, they and the more powerful members of the new protestant ascendancy moved heaven and earth to get a preaching ministry established, for this was the favoured instrument of conversion and also the principal amenity to which a progressive town could now aspire. The Earl of Huntingdon told the Bishop of Chester: 'I do all I can to get good preachers planted in the market towns of this country'. Archbishops Grindal and Hutton and, later still, archbishop Tobie Mathew co-operated enthusiastically in this enterprise.

How was the 'planting' done? As far as was feasible a parochial structure well designed for the singing of many masses and for baptising and burying within a few steps of people's doors was overhauled to provide for a learned preaching ministry. This involved the 'rationalisation' or pooling of resources. Corporations acquired the patronage of livings, small and scarcely viable parishes were amalgamated and livings were topped up with semi-voluntary contributions or, as in the case of Ipswich, by a local tax which required the backing of a special Act of Parliament. Lincoln's twenty-four parishes became nine, Stamford's eleven six. Scarcely more than half York's parish churches of 1500 were still in consecrated use in 1600. But such efforts were not always successful, or sufficient. Exeter failed in its parliamentary campaign to turn its many small parishes and unsuitable church fabrics into a single, barn-like building to accommodate sermons for the whole town. But fortunately in this city a new building was not necessary, as one already existed in the shape of the cathedral. Above all, the Church in the towns was hamstrung, and disproportionately, by the alienation or 'impropriation' of the bulk of its tithe revenues, a problem so extensive and fundamental as to require general legislative remedies which that side of the nineteenth century were beyond the capacity of the English political and legal system.[26] In these intractable circumstances the solution was often the appointment of a non-parochial clergyman, a figure of standing and commanding influence, often styled 'lecturer' but also called the 'common', 'ordinary' or 'public' preacher of the town.

The cities of protestant Europe were first in creating this role, elevating clerics whose place in the pre-Reformation ecclesiastical firmament would have been humble indeed into the exalted position of effective bishop or 'antistes' of these compact republics. So it was that in Strasbourg Martin Bucer, an ex-religious in charge of a poor suburban parish, became more potent than the ecclesiastical patricians of the cathedral chapter, and that in Zurich Huldreich Zwingli invested the hitherto lowly calling of 'people's priest' at the Grossmunster with a transcendent significance. It was the intellectual power and pulpit fluency of Bucer, Zwingli and other reformers which secured their charismatical ascendancy, for it was their sermons which brought salvation to whole cities. But such luminaries were much more than preachers of sermons, mere 'media' figures. Zwingli was soon hailed as 'bishop of the Fatherland', and from Bucer's household in Strasbourg the Italian reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli reported that at last he had seen with his own eyes the kind of primitive episcopacy described in the pastoral letters of the New Testament. 'This is the office of a pastor, this is that bishop-like dignity described by Paul in the Epistles unto Timothy and Titus.'[27]

The more modest setting of the provincial English town was imitative of this example and of these arrangements. John More, curate of the little Norwich parish of St Andrew's, came to be regarded as the 'Apostle of Norwich', John White in early seventeenth-century Dorset as the 'patriarch' of Dorchester. Such figures cultivated lengthy beards as symbols of their gravitas, and to make visible the recreation of the Old Testament prophetic role. Some vaguely scholarly memory of the original conditions within which and over which bishops had presided in primitive times in the many little cities of the Mediterranean world, reinforced by a contemporary sense of provincial political realities, commended to sixteenth-century Protestantism the model of a town sufficient unto itself and answerable for itself in religion as much as in other respects. The authority of a diocesan, living remotely in the country, visiting occasionally and burdened with innumerable distracting responsibilities, seemed by contrast unappealing and anomalous. So when Ipswich conducted its long and for some years mainly fruitless search for the ideal town preacher it was looking not for a mere lecturer but for a spiritual and pastorally gifted religious leader, capable of visiting the sick, comforting 'afflicted consciences' and defending true religion against its enemies and detractors.[28]

Not least among these functions was that of supporting and suitably exhorting the secular government of the town: ministry in close and confident association with magistracy. When dedicating to his employers, the corporation of Yarmouth, his own published catechism (itself serving as a standard of local orthodoxy) the town preacher Bartimaeus Andrews (and how much more authority he wielded as 'Bartimaeus' than as simple 'John Andrews'!) reminded these worthies of their solemn promise 'at my first entry amongst you' to promote God's glory. John Calvin had extracted a similar undertaking on arriving in Geneva. Andrews went on:

> You must know that the burthen of this people lieth upon your shoulders, and that their eyes look at you, as those by whose example the people either perish and fall or are preserved and stayed up, for the fall and uprising of many dependenth upon your public persons . . . Be you presidents in godly and sober example to this great people.[29]

To secure a man who could utter such words of reproving exhortation with credible conviction East Anglian towns were prepared to spend time, effort and money. In 1578 Yarmouth offered a yearly salary of £30 to a preacher of their choice 'if he will come hither'. Five years later its efforts to attract another promising man involved journeys to Cambridge, to the diocesan bishop and to the candidate himself. It was soon after this that one of the bailiffs travelled to the borders of Essex, fifty miles to the south, to persuade the ministers of the Vale of Dedham to release Bartimaeus Andrews from his country parish in order for him to assume the spiritual burden of Yarmouth. One of the Dedham ministers remarked that to remove Andrews from his pastorate would be like plucking out an eye. Mr Mayham of Yarmouth replied: 'Sir, if you cast out your eye you will give me leave to take it up'. In the words of Samuel Ward, the most celebrated of the town preachers of Ipswich, magistracy and ministry were 'principal lights', 'these two optic pieces' by which the whole body politic was enlightened.[30]

Andrews was offered, and accepted, a yearly salary of £50, substantially more than his rural living had been worth, at least on paper. At Ipswich the wages of the common preacher rose from £20 to £50 and then to £113, money enough for two preachers, in spite of difficulty in raising these sums from a partly apathetic citizenry. At last, when Jacobean Ipswich found its ideal in Samuel Ward, it was prepared to reward him with a stipend of £100 and a house worth £120. Was any officer of the town recompensed more handsomely? Towns fought relentlessly to prevent their patriarchs and apostles being taken from them, either by more attractive offers from elsewhere or by bishops jealous of their reputation or troubled by their Puritanism. Sensible, not to say negligent, bishops of Norwich left Ward, 'the glory of Ipswich', well alone. To attempt to eject the likes of Ward meant immediate trouble for themselves; to do nothing meant, at worst, future embarrassment for their successors.#31

This was not the only model or the sole means by which a preaching ministry was securely established in provincial towns. Actual circumstances depended upon local conditions, which were variable. Where incumbents were 'topped up' to bring their income to levels acceptable to professional men it would be difficult to say whether those so maintained should be styled vicar, curate or lecturer. In Boston the corporation owned the living, in Rye part of the living, and in each case the principal clergyman of the place was more the employee of the town than owner of a parson's freehold. Most corporations were less prosperous than Ipswich or Yarmouth, and it could be argued that the presence of competent preachers supported by the tithe income of country parishes within riding distance of the local market town rendered it unnecessary to tax the townspeople for the where withal to secure regular sermons. Since the country clergy were bound to come to town in any case for their necessary occasions, why not prevail upon them to preach before returning to their parishes? This was part of the rationale of setting up in the early Elizabethan Church the institutions known somewhat mysteriously as 'prophesyings', which were both festivals and schools of preaching. Typically held in market towns, and enjoyed by sermon addicts from both town and country, prophesyings brought together the clergy of the district, learned and unlearned, preachers and non-preachers, in regular 'exercises' and became one of those institutions which constantly mediated between two somewhat distinct but not separate worlds.#32

These occasions differed from a simple 'exercise' of preaching in that as many as three sermons were delivered in turn from the same text and the preaching was followed by 'conference' among the assembled clergy, perhaps extending to the exercise of mutual discipline on a more or less presbyterian plan. Because such arrangements pointed to a church structure in many ways different from that assumed within diocesan episcopacy, and perhaps also on account of the somewhat exotic name of 'prophesying', these institutions attracted hostile attention, not least from Queen Elizabeth herself. In 157' the queen directly ordered their suppression, after Archbishop Grindal of Canterbury had declined to transmit an order to this effect.

However the official cessation of prophesying made little difference to what was by now a settled pattern of provincial religious life, and one which was destined to outlive both the Tudors and their immediate Stuart successors. In scores, perhaps even hundreds, of market towns it was a regular habit for the country clergy to come together monthly, fortnightly or weekly, in what came to be known as a 'combination', each to take his turn in the 'exercise' or 'combination lecture'. The auditory formed a microcosm of seventeenth-century English society, representing as it did the ministers themselves, sitting in a body in their black gowns, the local gentry and the townspeople, from the mayor, bailiffs and other officers downwards. The eightyfive towns where it can be shown that combination lectures were regularly kept in the early seventeenth century included, in Norfolk, Diss, Fakenham, Hingham, King's Lynn, North Walsham, Wighton, Wiveton and Wymondham; in Cheshire, Bowden, Budworth, Congleton, Frodsham, Ince, Knutsford, Macclesfield, Motteram, Nantwich, Northwich, Tarporley and Tarvin. But it may be that if all the evidence were available to us it would be found that a shorter and more revealing list could be made of market towns where there were no regular lectures and where the authorities took no interest in preaching and made no provision for it.#33

Everyone was supposed to benefit. At least, all right-minded and orderly persons benefited. Market town lectures both directly assisted in the promotion of civil order and symbolised the kind of order desired, so that they were popular with the protestant magistracy as a kind of polar opposite to the disorder associated with alehouses and other places of evil repute. Apart from sharing in such aspirations the clergy enjoyed the congenial and learned society of their brethren and, in addition to the general benefit of sociable collegiality, sought their own professional advancement by regularly exposing their talents to the critical appraisal of the religious public of the district. As argued in Norfolk, the advantages of combination lecturing included 'advancement to the clergymen, when their gifts shall be known', and 'increase of love and acquaintance amongst preachers'. It is significant that after the lecture at Winwick in Lancashire the secular notables dined together in one ordinary or public eating house, the ministers at another, 'every man accompanying his acquaintance and so making as it were a whole chain of many links'.

But the rank and file of the laity, 'private Christians', were also said to gain: most obviously from the ready availability of religious instruction and inspiration. At Bury St Edmunds it was said: 'Your townsmen of Bury are such diligent hearers of the Word on the Monday exercise that they may easily be singled out from other men'. But there was also profit in a more literal sense in the stimulus which the regular lecture gave to the business of the market and to the general secular interests of the town. 'Benefit also to the inhabitants for their market by concourse of people', it was noted in Norfolk, where an unsympathetic ecclesiastic sourly complained that 'not a market, or a bowling green or an ordinary' could stand without a lecture. The cost to the town was, by convention, the price of the dinner consumed by the assembled clergy, or more often only the gallon or two of wine required to wash it down, the ministers paying modestly for a subsidised meal. An Oxford scholar and future bishop undertaking a rustic ride during the Long Vacation remarked satirically on his reception at puritan Banbury: we had the usual preacher's wages 'thanks and wine'.

So 'prophesying' and the 'combination lecture' expressed the reciprocity of town and countryside in early modern England. As we have seen, most municipal corporations were neither powerful nor impressive, but their significance lay in the very fact that they did not inhabit a sharply differentiated world. As Thomas Hardy wrote of nineteenth-century but still pre-industrial Casterbridge (Dorchester), it was the *complement* of rural society, not its opposite. (Yet socially speaking, as we learn from George Eliot's Middlemarch [Coventry], they were very different worlds. The reader of the novel who knows both the neighbouring gentry and the urban bourgeoisie has an advantage over the characters themselves, and especially over the gentlefolk who are literally unable to recognise the wives and families of even the richest townspeople.) It was in town that those with spending power, gentry and yeomanry, made most of their purchases, not only of market staples like corn and livestock, but of a vast miscellany of consumer goods. When Sir Nathaniel Bacon's man went from the north Norfolk coastal village of Stiffkey to Norwich he returned with 'nails, soap, currants, bellows, white lead', as well as 'three ounces of sugar candy for my mistress'. The mercer's shop in late Elizabethan Cranbrook (Kent) was crammed with several hundred pounds' worth of gloves, ribbons, silk buttons, drinking glasses, playing cards and, as Professor W. G. Hoskins wrote of a similar establishment in Exeter, 'Heaven knows what else'. It was a great age of penny numbers.#34

One went to town to consult lawyers, physicians and astrologers. It was in town that local government had its seat and juries assembled for sessions and assizes. Inns for travellers (and for a great variety of other purposes, from auction sales to cockfights) were mainly located in town centres. One third of all the inns in Yorkshire were situated in the city of York. Schooling was on the increase, and schools of any reputation were to be found in towns. Shakespeare, Marlowe and Nashe were all products of grammar schools in provincial towns and owed their school places to their bourgeois origins. The entertainments provided by travelling players, wild beast shows and itinerant

musicians were also something to be sampled in town. With all these activities (except 'unlawful', even 'filthy' entertainment) protestant religion was very much at home, whilst making its own distinctive contribution to the rhythmical patterns of urban life. The boys of the town grammar school were set to take notes at the sermons as a routine exercise. The more accomplished note-takers seem to have been responsible for the published versions which have come down to us. At Bury St Edmunds the full draconic severity of puritan discipline was exacted against fornicators and other offenders as a public *auto de fe* on Monday mornings, as people came from the weekly lecture and prepared to do their marketing and shopping.

The history of provincial England in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries consists (from one point of view) of the ever closer integration of town and country as the late medieval retreat from town (a prudent response to plague and other unhealthy conditions, as well as to business failure) was now reversed. The country gentry began to make more use of urban facilities and were joined by the growing ranks of pseudo- or semi-gentry, and by the more or less professional people who began to flesh out the upper levels of town society. The architectural symbol of this social and cultural transformation was the assembly rooms. In early eighteenth-century Kent even New Romney, with only 500 inhabitants, boasted assembly rooms; so did Lamberhurst, a village of 750 people. Towns, and especially country towns, were becoming the desirable focal points of provincial existence as never before.#35

The Reformation contributed significantly to the impression that town was a good place to be, even to stay. In 1591 a schoolmaster with hopes of preferment in Colchester informed its 'Senate': 'To be seated in a healthsome place where there is an ordinary publicke sanctifyed ministry is one special point, and not the least to be regarded'.#36 What made Colchester so 'healthsome' all of a sudden? Most towns still killed off their inhabitants at a faster rate than they could reproduce themselves. In 1579 plague carried away a third of the entire population of Norwich, a natural holocaust still hard to imagine, even in the terrible twentieth century. Deaths from plague in Norwich were on the same scale less than a generation later, in 1603-4, and in the intervening years a mortality rate of ten per cent was attributable to plague in the periods 1584-5 and 1589-92.#37

But it was the poor, and poor immigrants, who died in disproportionate numbers of this particular, terrible cause. (In 1558-9 the great outbreak of 'influenza', if that is what it was, was less choosy and in IVorwich killed the city recorder and ten aldermen.) The wealthy could leave at times of danger. Moreover, although doctors were not of much use in such emergencies it may have been thought that they could help and the supposed healthiness of towns may have been attributed to the presence of physicians of good reputation. As for Colchester, perhaps its principal amenity was the hill on which it does in fact stand, providing some protection against agues and the noxious humours supposed to cause many ailments. A contemporary account of Taunton describes it as 'well and healthily sited'.#38 But the schoolmaster's reference to the 'publicke sanctifyed ministry' was probably already a commonplace. A pseudo-gentleman who took up residence in Gloucester did so 'for his better service of God and for recovery of his wife's health by physic'.#39

What such facilities represented was 'civility', a quality of life increasingly prized. Of Swaftham in Norfolk it was said in 1608 that the inhabitants were 'more rude than easily will be believed to be of those that have been brought up in more civil places'.#40 Swaffham was not 'civil'. No more was Ireland. But Colchester, or Taunton, or Gloucester were civil places. But what *was* 'civil' about such places in 1600? In 1740 there would be assembly rooms, coffee shops, theatres, the first public libraries, musical events, all the necessities of a polite and cultivated existence. In 1600 there was only religion. This, of course, is to exaggerate. But the exaggeration serves to turn over the coin. What did the Reformation do to or for the English towns?

IV

The difficulty with local or regional history is that everywhere is different, so that the subject by its very nature courts particularism and resists treatment on a general or national scale. Ecclesiastically and religiously, the English towns were very diverse: as diverse as pre-Reformation York, neighbouring Hull or Rye in Sussex. York had its Minster, the richest abbey and the largest hospital north of the Trent, eight other religious houses, no fewer than fifty parish churches and as many as six hundred priests; Hull, an important sea-port and garrison town, had just two churches, neither of them technically a full parish church; Rye was served by just one great parish church. Religion in Hull seems to have consisted of a rather formal and even sterile practice which served to keep the inhabitants in place, rank and order. But Norwich on the eve of the Reformation was still the home of virtuoso religion, 'a religion of considerable richness and variety, a kind of High Church, almost Baroque Christianity'. Its devotees still included religious solitaries and its pious ladies lived in halfway houses between monasticism and lay piety, somewhat like the Dutch *béguinages*.#41

In some towns and cities the eve of the Reformation witnessed the still exuberant celebration of civic religious ceremony and ritual, including the plays performed on the feast of Corpus Christi and at other seasons. Elsewhere, as at Canterbury and Ipswich, enthusiasm had drained away from these things and pageantry was in decline well before the Reformation. It has been suggested that towns which were relatively free of social tension had no need to spend money on this expensive mode of affirming social values.#42 The reductionist potential of this argument, if pushed too far, is disturbing. Are we to interpret the strength of religious life in the late medieval town as an inverse reflection of the extent of the civic harmony actually prevailing? However there is unlikely to have been any single reason for the intensity or otherwise with which the 'mysteries' were celebrated.

The diversity of towns means that we have to talk in ideal-typical terms of no one town in particular and thus, in a sense, of nowhere, in order to encapsulate what the religious changes of the sixteenth century may have entailed. Religiously speaking they consisted of a vast reduction, simplification and, in modern jargon, rationalisation. The base-line from which 'reformation' began consisted of churches where the masses said or sung at the high altar attracted less attention than the many masses and offerings made at the side altars along the aisles of the nave, the altars of personal and family chantries and of those poor men's chantries which were the religious fraternities. In the Canterbury parish church of St Dunstan there was the Roper chantry chapel, erected above a vanlt containing the remains of the Ropers, the kinsfolk of Sir Thomas More's daughter, as well as the head supposedly salvaged from the Thames by Margaret Roper which some piously believed (and believe) to be that of More himself. But in this same small parish there were also fraternities of St John, St Anne and the Shaft of the Cross, each with its own rituals and rules, employing and paying its own clergy, conducting its annual general meetings, its processions and feasts. The religious and civic year was punctuated by formal ritual: in Canterbury this included the Corpus Christi processions and pageants of midsummer, the annual celebration of the Translation of the relics of St Thomas à Becket and the St George's Day solemnities in the breezy sunshine of late April, when the saint's image was carried in a procession headed by the mayor, aldermen and their wives. This tradition was hotly debated in the divisive 1540s, when Archbishop Cranmer's commissary asked the curate and churchwarden of St George's church whether they had obeyed their orders in pulling down the image of St George. 'They made answer and said Yes. Have you cut it in pieces? They said No. Then said the Commissary: It is not only the king's majesty's pleasure to have such images abused to be pulled down, but also to be disfigured, and nothing of such images to remain.' Mr Rand the churchwarden protested, pointing out that St George was patron of England. We have no patron but Christ, said Commissary Nevinson, and yet we pull down the Crucifix. 'Then, answered Mr Rand, if you pull down the Crucifix, then pull down all.'

The fear that 'all' would indeed be disfigured and pulled down was a lively apprehension. At Louth in Lincolnshire 'all' included a stupendous tower, 295 feet in total height, including the spire with which it had been capped as recently as 1515, erected at a cost of £305 8s 5d which had been subscribed to the last penny by the townspeople themselves. At the consecration ceremony, which included the installation of a weathercock made from a great bowl which a king of the Scots had left behind on a visit to England, several inhabitants were proud to testify that they had been present to witness the laying of both the first and the last stones of this crowning edifice. It was out of this church, through doors which still exist, that a local priest led his congregation in 1536, exhorting them to follow the cross or soon they would have no cross to follow. What ensued we know as the Lincolnshire Rising and the Pilgrimage of Grace.#43

The priest of Louth was not wrong in all his predictions. Presently the cross became an emotive symbol for two hostile religious factions. At Colchester in 1541 an iconoclast declared: 'I will do no more reverence to the Cross made in the similitude of the Cross of Christ than I would to the bathhouse'. This was shocking, even to the man of Appledore in Kent who confessed in 1543 that he crept to the Cross on Good Friday 'more for company than for devotion'. With Edward on the throne, crosses began to disappear. In 1548 it was reported from one Kentish parish: 'The image of the cross accustomed to be borne in procession doth not stand in any of the tabernacles at the high altar, since the commandment was declared at Ashford that such things should be taken away'. When 'such things' returned under Mary, Protestants, so far as they dared, voted with their bottoms at procession time. 'Why follow ye not the cross?' asked Richard Baker of Thomasine Ashton, who had sat in her pew while the rest of the parish of Westgate, Canterbury, processed. 'Ye be a heretic, will ye never leave your heresy?'

Just as a string of beads in the hand was a notorious badge of popery, so it is very likely that in the new Elizabethan dispensation crosses were no longer worn as personal adornment, and that cautious people were careful not to cross themselves when they sneezed. Perhaps the crosses were not laboriously hacked out of those many surfaces on city walls where they served the same function as the Victorian notice 'Commit No Nuisance'. That would have been to carry municipal Protestantism too far and to have incurred needless expense – and perhaps nuisance. But the authorities expected free-standing crosses in churchyards, however ancient, to come down, and in 1571 proceedings were taken against the churchwardens of one Yorkshire parish for not 'plucking down' such a cross, and for leaving their roodloft intact. By this late date the great cross or rood whicti had dominated virtually every church from its high station on the rood beam or 'loft', flanked with images of Mary and John, had mostly disappeared, the demolition having been carried out in most places in 1559-60. At supper in a Kentish parish John Maycot remarked that the roodloft 'went down merrily'. But what had been done was not universally acceptable and in a neighbouring village some that had been 'accusers' in Mary's days were dragged in against their will to witness the act. So Robert Colwell told Maycot: 'Let them take heed that they pull not down more this year than peradventure they shall set up again next year'. It was some few years after this that the suffragan bishop of Dover, Richard Rogers, was 'in a great chaff about the roodloft' in Great Chart church and created a minor sensation in the country by using a traditional catholic oath to one of the leading parishioners in the hearing of the entire congregation: 'By God's Soul'. But Rogers was entitled to feel indignant that the roodloft was still intact at Great Chart as late as 1568, for he had been rector of the parish since the previous year. So the symbol of the cross tracks the uncertain and rancorous progress of the Reformation in English provincial life. At court Queen Elizabeth made her position plain by restoring the crucifix to her royal chapel, thus provoking in Canterbury a rumour that the great rood would soon be replaced in the cathedral, and pushing the newly-appointed protestant bishops to the brink of resignation.#44 Reformation, even official reformation, was more drastic in many of its effects than either Anglican or puritan folklore has led us to suppose.

With the images and crosses went, by degrees (the process was far from complete until the 1570s or 1580s, or even later in some towns), not only solemn religious processions but also a variety of other customary and seasonal 'pastimes' associated with the church calendar, from the Corpus Christi plays of midsummer to the licensed misrule of midwinter. The antiquarian John Stow, an Elizabethan author of distinctly catholic sympathies, wrote a nostalgic account of the 'orders and customs', 'sports and pastimes' of his own native London where, as a boy, he had fetched milk hot from the cow in the fields beside the Tower. For the feast of Christmas every Londoner's home and the parish churches were decked with green. In Lent a twisted tree or 'with' was brought out of the woods and set up in people's houses. In May maypoles were brought in from the country and erected in the streets, with bonfires and stage-plays. Come June and July the vigils and feasts of St John the Baptist, St Peter and St Paul saw houses dressed in summer greenery, flowers and lamps. In the street were lit bonfires (so called because they were good fires, creating amity among neighbours, even as the fires purged infection from the air), and the wealthier sort set out tables with plentiful food and drink, inviting neighbours and passers-by to share their good fortune. It sounds too good to be true, and no doubt it was not quite like that. As Keith Thomas has suggested, 'Merrie England' always existed in the past, never in the present. But it existed in the future too. The customs which Stow described were by no means extinct in the London of Samuel Pepys and John Aubrey.#45

Sa far as we can tell, such occasions were often rowdy and bawdy. In York the Christmas procession of Yule and Yule's Wife was presently described by a protestant archbishop and other senior clergy as 'a very rude and barbarous custom', 'very undecently and uncomely', and we may well believe it. In late medieval civic ceremony decorous processional order and indecorous disorder were never far apart: indeed they were often juxtaposed. The formal drinking of healths could easily become informal drunkenness. And yet the nuts which Yule scattered as he rode were said to be symbols of 'that most noble Nut, our Saviour's blessed body'. The notion that Christ's humanity could be 'aptly compared to a nut' may be taken as a small symbol of the old religious culture, now under sentence. All these colourful rituals had a positive social purpose: either to affirm the fundamental unity of the civic community, the value of good neighbourhood which Stow held so dear, or (which is not quite the same thing) to provide relatively harmless channels for expressing antagonism in the nearviolence of misrule. And in London the seasonal exits to the woods and fields to return with greenery and maypoles perhaps symbolised something even more subliminal: the need to reconcile the teeming, crowded city with the countryside, where the service of God was still sustained in kind through the tithes which were the product of the soil, and where an important annual ritual involved the perambulation of the parish and its resources. In one Kentish parish the little procession took in 'the house of old Mr Gybbes, and had good cheer and dined there as the use was in those days'. 'Those days' were already distant when this was remembered, in 1567. When, in 1568, a cleric of Birchington in Thanet 'brought a faggot out of his chamber' on St Peter's Eve and lit the traditional bonfire this was a punishable offence.#46

These seasonal rituals were almost all contained in that half of the year which runs from Christmas to Midsummer, and which can be considered a distinctive and extended festive season, set against the relatively industrious second half of the year with its uninterrupted work discipline. Calendarwise the Reformation amounted to the intrusion of the working season into the months traditionally associated with a kind of holy play, in Phythian-Adams's words, 'a triumph of the secular half over its ritualistic counterpart'. For urban society there were no more important consequences of the Reformation than this: indeed there were few events of more importance between the Middle Ages and modern times. It was 'an obliteration of the established rhythm of life itself', no less a piece of secularisation than the conversion of the Black Friars in Canterbury to serve as Thomas Bathurst's cloth works.#47 In York Archbishop Grindal ordered that ministers and churchwardens

shall not suffer any lords of misrule or summer lords or ladies or any disguised persons or others in Christmas or at May games, or any minstrels, morris dancers or others at rush-bearings or at any other time to come unreverently into any church or chapel or churchyard and there dance or play any unseemly parts, with scoffing jests, wanton gestures, or ribald talk...

In many East Anglian parishes the traditional religious drama died its death in the 1560s. In Chelmsford it was in 1576 that the plays were suppressed and the costumes sold 'by the consent of divers of the parishioners'.#48

The traditional 'mysteries' were put down at about the same time in York, Wakefield, Chester and Coventry, to be replaced with midsummer shows and sports which were without religious associations and were purged of 'unseemly' or merely boisterous elements. At Chester the violent football matches always played on Shrove Tuesday ('Goteddsday') were replaced with running races and horse races, with silver cups for prizes. Here, indeed, one senses the advance of modern times in the form of our own youthful experience. But the dragon, naked boys in nets and devils in feathers of the midsummer show were replaced by the martial figure of a man on horseback in body armour which, contrariwise, looks like a piece of medieval atavism. These reforms were presided over by the aptly named Mayor Henry Hardware, who also 'caused the giants which use to go at Midsummer to be broken, the bull ring at the high cross to be taken up'. 'This mayor was a godly, over-zealous man', remarked a local chronicler.#49

But if this was a kind of secularisation, it paradoxically involved the sacralisation of the town, which now became self-consciously a godly commonwealth, its symbolic and mimetic codes replaced by a literally articulated, didactic religious discipline. In place of the seasonal complexities of the old calendar, the secular and festive half-years, there was now a new rhythm of working days and sabbaths, its keystone a weekly day to be set apart for the learning and performance of religious duties, when not only work but also all forms of play were forbidden. In the 1560s the corporation of Stratford-uponAvon was preoccupied with such purely secular nuisances or offences between neighbours as pigs being allowed to wander, the dumping of middens on the streets and the pursuit of noxious trades. But by the early 1600s Shakespeare's neighbours were concerned with offences against God: swearing, contempt for God's ministers and God's sabbaths, drunkenness. Stratford had become a Little Geneva, resolved, like so many other early modern European communities, to take the Ten Commandments seriously and to live by this divinely inspired code of conduct rather than by merely traditional norms.#50

Meanwhile the interior of the churches had been devastated, totally remodelled: the old imagery gone and replaced by the royal arms and scriptural texts, principally the Commandments, inscribed on boards. The building was now filled with 'convenient' seating which was not only practical but also symbolic in a new way, since it enabled the society of the town or parish to be arranged in ranking order of dignity and degree. The purpose of church assemblies was now to engage actively, attentively, but in quietly submissive order in a service of spoken prayer interspersed with congregational psalm-singing, and to listen, bible in hand or on lap, to sermons delivered from a physically dominant pulpit.

The new order, presided over by a tight alliance of 'ministry and magistracy', was as much concerned as the old to avoid scandalous disorder and conserve the harmony and wholeness of the town: indeed this was an objective now made more explicit. But the objective was now connected with obedience, disorder with disobedience, that is to say with disobedience to God, sin. Therefore order was to be spelt out in the spoken word and enforced by coercive discipline, not achieved in the charmingly roundabout fashion of 'pastime' and instinctive ritual and carnival. But there was also, in towns which were subject to the most vigorously ideological protestant influence, a determined, rational and, it must be said, enlightened onslaught on social evils and endemic problems: programmes of poor relief which were in advance of anything proposed or legislated on a national scale, as in Elizabethan Norwich and Ipswich, or at Salisbury and Dorchester in about 1630, where brewing was municipalised and the profits applied to social security.#51

It would go too far to call these policies and programmes disinterested. Everyone had an interest in controlling and if possible removing the worst symptoms of urban poverty, but those with the property of the town in their hands had the greater interest. The grammar school was a notable ornament, but it favoured the sons of the ruling oligarchies. Whereas the early Reformation, in Canterbury for example, was associated with the efforts of the middling and politically disadvantaged elements of society to break into town government,#52 the middle age of the Reformation was often accompanied by the tightening grip of oligarchies which used religion as a prime instrument of social control and self-advancement.

V

Protestantism was supposed to recreate that Jerusalem whose outstanding feature, according to the Psalmist, was that it was at unity in itself. In fact it brought division and accentuated political conflict: to the kind of contest over public resources and office holding which was doubtless endemic and may be considered normal it added a more unusual and transcendent element of religious, moral and cultural strife. Preaching ministers were often accused by their enemies of dividing communities which had previously been at peace. In Elizabethan Hull the preacher Melchior Smith was said to have been 'a great occasion of contention and great strife amongst the inhabitants', having earlier sown discord in Boston and Burton-on-Trent. Similar charges were laid against the preachers in the market towns of the Kentish Weald: 'Hath not Minge brought Ashford from being the quietest town of Kent to be at deadly hatred and bitter division? . . . Hath not Eelie set Tenterden, his parish, together by the ears, which before was quiet? What broil and contention hath Fenner made in Cranbrook!'#53

Such complaints were more polemical than factual. Modern historians should not too readily assume (as they sometimes do) that the parishes most exposed to puritan preaching and discipline were necessarily the most faction-ridden, or that towns characterised by the relaxed values of 'good fellowship' were always quiet and orderly. But some credibility is given to the charge that fiery Protestantism was divisively aggressive by the fact that the preachers complained of did not always simply deny it. Melchior Smith would not admit to provoking dissension in Hull deliberately but he conceded that offence might be a consequence of preaching frankly against popery and heresy and 'beating down' the 'wicked vices reigning in these evil days among this sinful and adulterous generation'. If this was to offend, the prophets and apostles were all equally to blame; 'yea, and Christ himself, at whose preaching there was as much dissension as at any man's'. On the other hand Smith insisted that with enemies like the people of Boston he had no need of friends, for they had treated him with extraordinary kindness and generosity: 'Their love was such towards him that willingly they would hear none preach but him'. And it is very likely that no town was more united than the town which was united in the enjoyment of the Gospel.

Alas, there seem to have been few such towns! At Maldon in Essex there were, in the 1580s, two ministers. Both were preachers, indeed they competed in unseemly fashion for occupancy of the same pulpit. But they preached different doctrines, or at least applied their doctrine differently and had widely different notions of how the town should get along. George Gifford gathered his friends and disciples into domestic conventicles and wrote books explaining that the proper way not only to preserve the peace and harmony of the community but also to ward off the wiles of the Devil, perceived by the simple as witchcraft, was for every man to search and try his own heart and conscience. To live 'conscionably' would be to live amicably. But Robert Palmer, his rival, drummed up custom in a bowling alley in which he himself had an interest ('a great sort or swarm of men') and spent so much time playing cards in the New Inn that (according to

his enemies) 'he cannot set down'. Gifford wrote causticaily about such clerics and their followers who thought time spent on the alebench a 'godly way' to promote love and fellowship among neighbours. Rival factions took shape behind these two recipes for civic harmony.#54

Both factions consisted of Protestants, or would have claimed to be protestant. In Gifford's dialogue *The countrie divinitie* the character of 'Atheos' asks: Why do you speak to me of the pope? 'I would that he and his popery were buried in the dunghill.' But, outside the ranks of office-holders and sometimes no longer in their seats in church to which their status as rate-payers would have admitted them, there were those 'pope-holy knaves', the surviving or newly converted Catholics. Perhaps there were not very many of them, especially in the towns, where there were fewer than in the great country houses of the recusant gentry and in the villages of their tenants. Often they disguised their true beliefs and motives and as 'church papists' avoided outright recusancy. In Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1590s Shakespeare's father stayed away from church, pleading his embarrassment as a debtor who was liable to be attached or arrested if he appeared in such a public place. Was that the real reason?#55

Such uncertainties bred suspicion. In Elizabethan Thetford, a town said to be divided between 'a side of godly and honest men' and 'an other part ... frowardly inclined', the 'froward', that is to say religiously conservative, maintained control of the town at a time when much of East Anglia was passing into the control of staunchly protestant magistrates. Indeed it was the newly dominant puritan gentry of West Suffolk who were responsible for this prejudicial analysis of Thetford society, in a report to the Privy Council. The mayor, it was said, stayed away from the sermons offered by visiting preachers (Thetford had no resident preacher), and of his colleagues in the corporation one was said to keep in his house 'relics of the pope', another seemed 'rather papist than otherwise' for he too disliked sermons, while yet another seemed 'of no good religion' for if he were he would not sit drinking and gaming at service time. Another prominent townsman was of indeterminate religion, 'but he hath a brother there, a notable papist'. Very few of the city fathers of mid-Elizabethan Thetford could sign their names. In every way they were resistant to 'civility' on the godly pattern.#56 But as a new breed of magistrate came to the fore in towns subject to regular and systematic protestant indoctrination they, like the preachers, proved divisive influences: in Chester, in Banbury, in Exeter, and in a score of West Country towns where Professor David Underdown has found that 'cultural conflict' 'raged' in the early years of the seventeenth century.#57 To these cases we shall return in the final chapter.

Here we may end on a more positive if speculative note, taking a more distant view with the aid of a metaphorical hour-glass. Late medieval culture, inextricably involved with religion as it was in the matrix of the English provincial town, was a rich, tumultuous, irrepressible animal: the fat upper half of our hour-glass. Late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century town life acquired a new richness, solemnity and style as notable public buildings were erected and the gentry and pseudo-gentry proceeded to make it their own. The festive, ritual scene revived and there was much frank enjoyment of the good things which the town had to offer. Dr Borsay writes of 'the formidable variety' of public rituals and ceremonies which flourished in this later period, civic, élite and popular. Once again such activities served to express and motivate feelings of authority and consensus, but were also vehicles of barely suppressed social conflict.#58 But now it all happened on somewhat altered terms. Popular culture was condoned, even encouraged, by the élite for its value as a safety-valve, while the élite in its own no less elaborate rituals expressed 'profound disengagement' from traditional, unsophisticated culture. The English town had discovered not just 'civility' but civilisation, high society and social class. This was the lower half of the hour-glass. In between there was a narrow neck, through which the sand fell finely but with considerable force: the Protestant Reformation, which destroyed so much and limited and restricted what was left, but which acted as a kind of midwife for the future.