England's Radical Reformation
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In this series I have told a series of distinct, but, I hope, reasonably coherent stories about the religious changes that convulsed sixteenth-century England and whose aftershocks were felt long afterwards. This last story is not so straightforward. Many of my protagonists today would not have recognized one another as brethren. The connections between them are often speculative at best. At the time, and since, they have all too often looked merely like the assorted debris of the Reformation: pieces that were flung out because they did not or would not fit, fringe extremists or irrelevant curiosities. My task this evening is to try to persuade you that this cast of misfits and cranks adds up to a story. I want to persuade you, in fact, that England had a Radical Reformation.

For most of the past five hundred years we have not seen it that way. The Radical Reformation is a term that historians began using in earnest in the 1960s: another historian of that period talked, revealingly, about the 'left wing of the Reformation'. These historians were talking above all about a series of movements which emerged in Europe in the 1520s, hard on the heels of Martin Luther's quarrel with the papacy that started in 1517. From the very start Luther was beset by overenthusiastic allies who wanted to take his ideas further than he did or to turn them in subtly or sharply different directions. As early as 1521–2 he was openly denouncing these people as 'fanatics' whose foolish zeal and indeed moral depravity had led them headlong into dangerous error. These 'fanatics' came to be associated with two things above all, one theological innovation and one political stance. The theological innovation is the view that only adults who chose to make a profession of faith might be baptized, rather than all infants being baptised very soon after their birth. The first adult baptisms we know of took place in Zurich in 1525. This lady is not actually being baptised but is about to be executed by drowning for the crime of adult baptism; and if that seems to you like an overreaction, well, yes, but this was a more provocative and consequential matter than it might seem to modern ears, for two reasons. First, it means a church that cannot be a universal, all-embracing community, like the medieval Catholic Church or indeed the post-Reformation Church of England, into which the whole nation is born by default. A church that practices adult baptism is a church that requires a positive choice to join it and which must therefore exclude a portion – probably a large majority – of the population. In a world where it was assumed that religious unity was the necessary underpinning for social and political harmony, a religious movement whose very basis meant that it could not serve as a unifying force was genuinely frightening. And secondly, the decision to reject infant baptism opened a Pandora's box of other alarming possibilities. The simplest reason for rejecting infant baptism was that the Bible never mentions the practice, as indeed it does not. But ancient Christian communities certainly were baptising infants very early on, certainly from the second century of the modern era. So, if you reject infant baptism as an error, you are also committed to saying that the early Christian church went badly astray very quickly. In which case, presumably all the other major decisions the early church made are up for grabs too? What becomes of the doctrine of the Trinity, the great disputes over the nature of Jesus Christ, even the question of what counts as part of the Bible, part of the canon of Scripture itself? These were fundamental questions about the essence of Christianity which Luther and the other respectable reformers badly wanted not to reopen. So, denying infant baptism was about more than a splash of water. It was the theological equivalent of

dousing a church with petrol and sauntering around flicking matches.

And as I said, this is a political as well as a theological threat. Those first adult baptisms in Zurich took place in the midst of a vast peasant rebellion, the largest mass rising in European history before the French Revolution, the so-called Peasants' War of 1524-5 in which longstanding local and secular grievances were given new force by revolutionary implications of Luther's ideas and the reckless, apocalyptic radicalism of the preachers who chose to press those implications much further in the direction of social and political change than Luther himself was ever willing to countenance. The rebellious peasants were eventually defeated in a series of battlefield massacres, but there was worse to come, when in 1534 a set of prophecies led to a number of radicals converging on the western German city of Münster, declaring an apocalyptic kingdom there, and trying to create a perfect new community of community of goods, polygamy and very violently enforced conformity until the besieging armies brought the experiment to a bloody end. Münster became a byword for the radicals, the 9/11 of the age, a dreadful warning destined always to be overheeded. And the radicals came to be called *Anabaptists*, that is, literally, 'rebaptisers', since they insisted on taking people who had been properly baptised as infants and trying to do it again, even though all Christians agree that the sacrament of baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime, unrepeatable event. Since the radicals of course did not believe that dunking a baby is a real baptism, calling them *Anabaptists* is a term of abuse. But that's what happens to feared and hated minorities. They were ferociously persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike, reduced to isolated communes, and their few descendants eventually found refuge in North America. In particular, they hardly set foot on English soil. In the wake of the Münster catastrophe, there were scares about Dutch Anabaptists crossing the water to England. Henry VIII regarded the prospect with genuine horror, and his evangelical chief minister Thomas Cromwell was absolutely at one with him on this. As many as two dozen Netherlanders were rounded up and executed on the charge of Anabaptism in England under Henry VIII. No-one spoke up to defend them, and they have been almost forgotten. You will find no mention of them in Hilary Mantel's otherwise wonderful account of Cromwell's life and work. So, the English Anabaptist movement that might have been was strangled in the cradle, and England could claim with a straight face that it simply did not have a radical Reformation. A few eccentrics, perhaps: but England's Reformation was orderly, genteel and dignified, a world apart from the fanatics and revolutionaries that beset our always over-excitable European neighbours.

But the eccentrics were not as few in number as you might think, and they were more than a scattering of misfits. If we join the dots a larger picture emerges. To see that picture, we need to adjust our frame in two ways. First, to recognise that there was more to the radical Reformation than infant versus adult baptism, as important as that issue was. Perhaps the single most famous preacher of the radical Reformation in Germany, the revolutionary Thomas Müntzer, who as this statue shows was much celebrated by the communist regime in East Germany, was never directly associated with adult baptism. Second, we need to recognise that the boundary between the radical and the respectable Reformations was never as clear or watertight as those respectable establishments want you to think. The radicals were not another species or some alien import, easily isolated and eradicated. The seeds of radicalism were scattered throughout what that most respectable of reformers, Archbishop Cranmer, called 'this world of reformation'. Those seeds might remain dormant for decades, but they could spring into life as soon as the conditions were right.

For the first of the dots, I'm going to try to connect, we need to look back beyond the conventional beginning of the English Reformation, to the so-called 'Lollards', a loose movement of religious dissent endemic in parts of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England, deriving ultimately from the unorthodox fourteenth-century Oxford theologian John Wyclif. Their importance has often been exaggerated, whether by their contemporaries' hypersensitivity towards heresy, or by later Protestants' eagerness to confect a medieval lineage for themselves: joining the dots here is an

old and dubious game. It is very tempting to discern Lollard involvement in, for example, the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381, one of whose leaders, the renegade priest John Ball, famously preached that 'from the beginning all men by nature were created alike', and that divisions of wealth and status were a 'yoke of bondage' to be thrown off. Well, perhaps. Regardless, he did not leave much of a legacy behind him. After a brief flowering in the late 14th and early 15th century, the Lollards were firmly discredited, suppressed and driven to the margins.

Some Lollards hung grimly on for another century, from the 1420s until the Reformation era itself; but these people preached neither John Ball's revolution nor John Wyclif's sophisticated, idealistic critique of orthodox religion. They were a persistent presence in some English towns (London, Bristol, Coventry) and regions (Buckinghamshire, Essex, Kent, Oxfordshire), but were no longer advancing. They apparently had only one unvarying, positive doctrine: the conviction that the Bible in English should be freely available. Beyond that their beliefs were a series of denials. They generally rejected any notion that a person, place or object could be sacred. So, they despised priests as oppressive hypocrites; ridiculed sacraments – sometimes all of them – as meaningless; reviled images, relics, rites and sometimes even church buildings as mere monuments to superstition; and were quite ready to deride traditional Christian doctrines linked to those monuments. Wyclif had criticized the doctrine of transubstantiation, the miracle by which Christ's body and blood were made physically present in the Mass, in subtle philosophical terms. The later Lollards, although claiming Wyclif as their inspiration, used vicious mockery instead. In an age which revered the Virgin Mary, they derided her with crude innuendos. Sometimes this kind of talk seemed to imply deep questions about the nature of Jesus Christ's humanity, but they were not trying to raise profound theological questions. They were kicking against the pricks.

This century-long malcontented rumble posed no very serious threat to the Church. Lollard numbers are impossible to estimate, but there were not many of them, even in their strongholds. Most of them continued to attend their parish churches, pulling faces during Mass, keeping a stony silence while their neighbours prayed, jeering at priestcraft in the alehouse afterwards. They met discreetly in one another's homes to read and pray and argue. They had no churches, no ministers, and no structures aside from informal networks which circulated forbidden, hand-copied books. They had no more than a handful of sympathizers among the gentry and the clergy. The law was enforced against them sporadically. Periodically, a bishop might lead an anti-heresy drive for a few months, often as a means of demonstrating to his orthodox flock that he meant business. Such purges usually consisted of rounding up the usual suspects, most of whom would be induced to recant their errors, with only a handful being, like this unfortunate fellow in the barrel, persistent or unlucky enough to be executed. Lollardy was, from the hierarchy's perspective, like a persistent infestation of fleas: a nuisance that stubbornly defied extermination, but not a mortal danger.

English Protestants have often claimed the Lollards as their ancestors, and Wyclif as the morning star of the Reformation. But in fact, the Lollards seem to have done little to prepare the way. Few of the first leaders of English evangelicalism had any discernible debt to the Lollards. The evangelicals' core message was overwhelmingly about faith and the nature of salvation, a message which derived entirely from Martin Luther's movement and owed nothing at all to Lollardy. But Lollards recognized the new evangelicals as brethren, listened eagerly to their preachers and bought their books. By the middle of the sixteenth century – at the latest – Lollardy had simply vanished into the burgeoning Protestant movement, whose critique of traditional religion was far suppler and more coherent, and whose leaders were, unlike most Lollards, ready to seal their faith with their blood.

But Lollardy still had a part to play. In the first, fragile years of English evangelicalism, longstanding Lollard networks were a ready-made audience, and were invaluable vectors for the transmission of forbidden books. More significantly, English evangelicals who were painfully aware that their movement looked like a heretical innovation rather than ancient Christian truth were keen

to seize any form of historical legitimacy they could. Claiming the Lollard heritage for themselves was an obvious gambit. Lollards had never made use of the printing press, but from the late 1520s onwards evangelicals were publishing old Lollard texts as proof that they had a tradition behind them. This effort continued long after the last people we can plainly identify as Lollards vanished from the record. The English Reformation's great historian John Foxe was an early enthusiast for Lollardy, and his research assembled a good deal of what we now know about the movement. For him, the Lollards were part of a thin but unbroken thread of faithful English Christianity running through the dark centuries of papal tyranny.

How far anyone was ever really persuaded by these arguments, we may doubt. But valorizing Lollardy and claiming its heritage had consequences. Lollards and mainstream English Protestants agreed on a lot – the centrality of the Bible, the critique of the Church and its rites – but not on everything. Lollardy's blunt rejection of any kind of material holiness was much closer to the sharp-edged Reformed, proto-Calvinist Protestantism that became dominant in England from the mid-1540s onwards than it was to the milder, more Lutheran-inflected evangelicalism of the 1530s. Lollard networks may have helped smooth that shift. But many Lollards also held some views which went beyond respectable Protestantism of any kind. So, let's park them grumbling on the sidelines for a few minutes and look at some of the radical currents starting to surface within the English Reformation itself, currents which as we will see pick up on some of those Lollard themes.

I think you can group those radical currents, currents that emerge in England during the century following Henry VIII's break with Rome, into three streams: a perfectionist-mystical stream, a separatist stream and a utopian stream. Let's look at each of those in turn. Perfectionist-mystical radicalism first surfaced under Edward VI, when the new Protestant establishment was coalescing around a new, hard-edged orthodoxy: the doctrine of predestination, which holds that some of us are eternally predestined to heaven, others to hell, and that all of us are powerless to affect that decree in any way. It is a doctrine which has always struck some people as intuitively repugnant. A small movement of so-called 'Freewillers' – evangelicals who asserted that God let them choose their own eternal fate – sprang up in parts of rural Kent, and elsewhere. During the years of persecution under Queen Mary, the regime actively used the division between Freewillers and predestinarians to stir up trouble among Protestants, deliberately putting rivals in prison together and delaying the executions of people who they identified as particularly divisive. But even with this discreet assistance, the 'Freewillers' could not compete with the predestinarians' networks, their academic credibility and their charismatic leaders. They were outmanoeuvred and discredited and by 1558 the movement had disappeared. Just another dot.

But if they vanished, their ideas did not. In the 1560s, a Dutch mystical movement who also rejected predestination began to win English adherents. This movement called themselves the Family of Love; to modern eyes, they do not really live up to that wonderfully sinister name, but at the time they certainly provoked real fear. These 'Familists', as they quickly came to be called, were not interested in adult versus child baptism. Like the Lollards before them, they conformed outwardly to the established churches. Instead, they were spiritualists: they treated orthodox Christian doctrine as an allegory for their own mystical quest, a quest whose purpose was not salvation in the conventional Christian sense, but inner union with Christ, what they called being 'Godded with God'. Unlike the Freewillers of the 1550s, they followed their rejection of predestination through to its full implications. If they were free to choose their own path, surely that must mean they were free to choose moral perfection, regardless of conventional Christian views of original sin? Perhaps, empowered by the Holy Spirit, they could transcend the lumpen business of earthly right and wrong altogether, ascending from the darkness of Law to the light of Grace?

After a wave of panic about Familists in the years around 1580, the sect slowly faded from view, but once again their ideas persisted. In the 1590s we hear of English radicals questioning baptism

– not advocating adult baptism but arguing that Catholic baptism was irredeemably corrupt; that true Christian baptism had therefore vanished from the world during the dark centuries of popery; and so that Christians must abandon baptism or any kind of church until God saw fit to send new prophets to renew his people. The last two English people ever to be burned for heresy, in 1612, held views of this kind. One of them believed that he himself was the new John the Baptist.

These were extreme and eccentric positions, but a broader and more troubling variant of 'Familism' would soon emerge. A renowned London preacher named John Everard discovered this spiritualist tradition during the 1620s, immersing himself in medieval mystical writings. The Bible, he came to believe, was 'symbolical and figurative', a 'dead letter' which could not be compared to what he called 'the inward word … the law of God written in our hearts'. A scattering of other zealous Protestants were becoming disenchanted with the English Church's Calvinist consensus and what they felt was its arid moralism. The establishment's doctrines might have been intellectually neat, but they did not seem adequate to describe the inner experience of assurance of God's grace and free forgiveness that these spiritual adventurers had found. So when the Calvinist consensus was broken up by the counter-revolution led by King Charles I and Archbishop Laud in the 1630s, the spiritualists were waiting. Soon London's underground radical scene was teeming with tiny splinter embracing spiritual union with Christ, downplaying talk of sin and judgement, even abandoning relics like conventional prayer or faith in bodily resurrection.

Alarmingly unorthodox as all this may seem, what made it dangerous was that it arose so naturally from mainstream Protestantism. The mystical texts which so enraptured Everard had also been favourites of Martin Luther's. The notion of grace transcending law was one of Luther's signature doctrines. Talk of free forgiveness, a longing for an experience of inner assurance, worries about the corruption of inherited Catholic rites, a wish to rise above the carnal and embrace the spiritual – these were all vanilla Protestantism. Mystics and perfectionists were not a different species from their orthodox neighbours, but a variant easily similar enough to interbreed. That was what made them so frightening.

The same is true of the second radical strand, the separatists. I've talked before about how the notion of 'the Church of England', a single, universal church embracing the entire nation, mattered deeply to the English Reformation's sense of itself. Most of the 'puritans' who yearned for further reformation nevertheless remained deeply committed to that unified national project. This often-involved painful negotiations with their consciences. A recurrent story during later sixteenth or earlier seventeenth centuries is of the puritan minister who tries to hold down a church position of some kind, who refuses to conform on some point that his conscience cannot swallow – vestments, the sign of the cross in baptism, kneeling to receive communion: there were plenty of tripwires – and who is eventually forced to choose between giving way or being deprived of office. Many such people resigned themselves to a miserable half-life, working perhaps as private tutors, still attending the worship of a church they held to be dangerously corrupt.

These people thought of themselves, rightly, as faithful members of the Church of England, but they were also something else: a brotherhood of the 'godly'. They still sat in the pews alongside their carnal neighbours, and they did not pull faces or jeer in alehouses, but the heart of their religion was elsewhere: in the sermons and lectures they travelled to outside their home parishes, in the informal gatherings with sympathetic ministers where they delved deeper into the mysteries of their faith, in 'godly conference' with one another in private houses. Like the Lollards before them, they were a church within a church, and little love was lost between them and their more conformist neighbours.

The final step into schism was therefore both momentous and natural. If puritans were slow to take that step, it was partly because the regime took a very dim view of open separatism. The only foolproof way for an English Protestant to leave the Church of England was to leave England itself.

During the 1570s and 1580s the substantial expatriate communities of English merchants in the Netherlands became hosts to separatist congregations modelling what a reformed English Church could be. Most of these communities were Presbyterian: so, they still wanted an all-embracing national Church, just a different one, free of bishops and all the other corrupt popish compromises. There were plenty of Presbyterians in England, too, most of them unhappily remaining within the established church, some eventually taking the dangerous step of withdrawing to form clandestine communities of their own.

But a few went further. England's early separatists became known as 'Brownists', although Robert Browne, who tried briefly to found a separatist congregation in Norwich in 1581 and then launched a more enduring venture in the Netherlands later the same year, had returned to the bosom of the Church of England by 1585. Here is the rather awkward memorial to him in the Anglican church where he long served as a conformist minister. Brownists, or 'Independents', or 'Congregationalists', aspired not to be a new universal church, but – more modestly, more dangerously – simply to form godly communities of their own, recognizing that the faithful would only ever be a remnant in a reprobate world. They were, in other words, implicitly abandoning the entire notion of a unified Christian society.

These little communities hung on in exile, but while the Dutch were welcoming enough, it was hard to see what their future might be there. They feared they would eventually 'lose our language, and our name, of English'. Then, in the 1610s, a new possibility appeared. England was, after several false starts, beginning to establish colonies on the North American mainland. English government being what it is, the project was being done on the cheap. Settlers who funded their own colonies could buy themselves a remarkable amount of freedom, not least in religion. The English Congregationalists in Leiden began negotiating such a deal with King James I. When the *Mayflower* eventually sailed from Plymouth in 1620 – this isn't the real thing, obviously, it's the reproduction built in the 1950s, whose builders claim it is 'probably quite similar' to the original: anyway, half of the hundred passengers on that original *Mayflower* were former Dutch exiles. An American colony answered the Congregationalists' dilemma: how to be faithful both to their consciences and their nation? If the only solution involved crossing an ocean and settling in an environment so hostile that it killed fully half of the settlers in the first winter, then so be it. The name for their settlement tells you everything: 'New England'.

It remained tiny and marginal during the 1620s, but under Charles I a new and much larger wave of English puritans were pushed into separatism and exile. A thousand more Congregationalist 'pilgrims' arrived in Massachusetts in 1630. By 1640 some 20,000 had made the crossing. They would do more than anyone else to set the religious tone of British North America and of the United States as it eventually emerged: fiercely determined in their own piety, conscious of their unique calling, but fully aware that they were a minority in a plural society and a godless world. They preferred to pursue their own perfection rather than wait for others to join them, much less drag others with them.

Theologically, these separatists were, or tried to be, pretty orthodox Protestants. But once they had abandoned the national Church, the line was hard to hold. A great many questions to which Protestants had generally given traditional answers were soon being reopened. Should heresy and blasphemy be treated as crimes? Should Christians accept that warfare could sometimes be just? Could Christians legitimately swear oaths, despite the apparently biblical warnings against the practice? Anyone committed to an all-embracing Christian society with a single, national church was more or less compelled to answer 'yes' to all of these questions. But once they had abandoned that commitment, morally enticing but politically impractical ideals like toleration and pacifism beckoned. Free of the crushing responsibility to create rules that an entire society might be able to follow, the separatists began exploring new possibilities: many of them possibilities that the Lollards had explored before them. Even the incendiary question of infant versus adult baptism

reared its head. Remember, the primary reason for opposing adult baptism was that it made maintaining a universal church impossible. But the Congregationalists had already sold that pass. If they had scruples about infant baptism, why not indulge them?

So, my first two streams, separatist radicalism and perfectionist-mystical radicalism, tended to blur into one another. In 1636–8, the colony at Massachusetts endured a bitter split between a conventionally Calvinist majority and a fringe of dissidents led by the pious, well-educated midwife Anne Hutchinson. She felt that rigid legalism was cramping the gospel's true spirit just as badly in the New World as it had at home. She and her spiritualist followers were ultimately thrown out, but they were welcomed into the neighbouring colony of Rhode Island by Roger Williams, who had himself been expelled from Massachusetts in 1636 and was now advocating adult baptism and, in this deservedly famous tract, absolute religious toleration. Denouncing radicalism, it was becoming clear, was the easy part. Preventing it from spreading was a different matter.

And so, it was with the third stream of radicalism, utopianism: the persistent hunch that Christian society could and should be remade in the light of the gospel. Already in Henry VIII's reign, a few idealists had wondered about using the Royal Supremacy to implement sweeping change. If you were Thomas Cromwell, this meant a relatively modest and pragmatic set of reforms to fuse the church and the state more closely together. If you were his excitable protégé and informant Clement Armstrong, this meant a wildly implausible scheme which envisaged a comprehensive system of moral surveillance covering every household in England, using the king's newfound spiritual authority to impose a systematic godliness on his subjects. This was a world of reformation, and they were well aware of the old adage that you should never let a crisis go to waste.

As the shine began to come off the evangelicals' alliance with Henry VIII, more of them began to dream of projects to build a just commonwealth. Central to most of these concerns was money. The Reformation, like most revolutions, had made a few individuals very rich, acquiring church goods, lands and incomes which the common people had once, naïvely, imagined belonged in some sense to them. It rankled. When the monasteries were dissolved, almost all of the proceeds were swallowed up by Henry VIII's wars and by his courtiers, and that was not how it had been sold to the country. There had been promises that the wealth of the monasteries would be used to build roads, to endow hospitals, to found schools, even to establish new universities: the Lollards had argued for centuries that Oxford and Cambridge's stranglehold on higher education needed to be broken, and Lollard sympathisers had once introduced a bill into parliament to establish fifteen new universities. Now evangelical preachers and pamphleteers started to put forward schemes of their own. These 'commonwealthmen', as they came to be called, were not an organised party, but a mood of rumbling discontent. Some offered relatively modest proposals, focusing on specific laws and grievances, chiefly those to do with the enclosure of common land. Others were more sweeping, urging wholesale redistribution of church goods or abolition of the House of Lords. Two things held these disparate projects together: a mood of idealistic moral urgency; and a sustained hostility to the clergy as a caste, from the bishops, or 'forked caps', through the 'purgatory horseleeches' (monks) to the 'dumb dogs', that is, the ordinary parish priests, never opening their mouths to preach the gospel, merely drowning in their own 'swinish filthiness'.

When Henry VIII died and an unapologetically Protestant regime took power under Edward VI, the commonwealthmen had their moment. They were openly encouraged by the new government, and many of their themes were picked up by leading preachers like the former bishop Hugh Latimer, preachers who rolled a moral critique of their society and its elites into a critique of the Church and its corruption. A couple of years of this kind of populist Protestant politics ended in a summer of disturbances, the so-called 'camping time', that spread across most of southern England in 1549. It was not exactly England's answer to the Peasants' War in Germany, not least because almost everywhere it ended without bloodshed, but the parallels are there. The key

difference was that the English peasants who gathered themselves into encampments, broke down the fences enclosing common land and sent demands for redress generally believed that the government sympathised with their concerns; and they may have been right to a degree, since Lord Protector Somerset sent them soothing letters, and some of the regime's leading preachers came to address the encampments. Of course, the government was also painfully aware that it did not have the resources to suppress risings on this scale by force if it came to that, so soothing noises were all they had. Protector Somerset's horrified colleagues in government deposed him in a palace coup later that year and there would be no more dangerous populism from Protestant regimes. All that was left was an enduring popular memory of the 'good duke', and a sense that the radical preachers were on the side of the people.

Under Queen Elizabeth, utopian talk of this kind was not encouraged. Suppressing it, however, did not make it go away. Sometimes it was blurted out, which usually cost someone their career or their head; sometimes it was hidden inside coded critiques. This tract may look like a coded critique, but read where it claims to be printed – 'overseas … within two furlongs of a bouncing priest' – and you'll see it's not very coded at all: in fact, it was printed on a clandestine press in England, and its publishers led the regime a merry chase before eventually being closed down. These themes were, naturally, picked up by our other two groups of radicals, the spiritualists and the separatists. The regime tried to suppress that utopian anger against priests and their ways by insisting that the new ministers of the Church of England were quite unlike the popish priests who had preceded them: it was their godliness, their learning and their orthodoxy which set them apart, not sacramental ordination, tonsure or the mumbling of Latin. Therefore – so the argument went – those ministers truly deserved the reverence and obedience which their popish predecessors had falsely usurped. You did not need to be especially radical to be suspicious of this bait-and-switch, merely to notice that not all of the new Protestant ministers were everything they were cracked up to be. Before long radicals were starting to question the entire notion that a minister needed to be educated, a notion which once again supported that stranglehold which the two universities maintained. Surely it was better to be filled with the Holy Spirit than with human knowledge. Perhaps knowledge, which puffed the educated up with delusions of grandeur, was actually an *obstacle* to true godliness? Perhaps true Christians should go back to Martin Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and reject the idea of a separate ministerial caste altogether?

These different, contradictory radical voices, my three streams, do not constitute a single, uniform radical Reformation. But nor were they completely disconnected. They were tied together at both ends of the Reformation period. At the start, in the sense that all of them stood in succession to the Lollards. This is not to claim that a living tradition of Lollard radicalism endured throughout our period, although that is possible: certainly, there are intriguing signs that the same villages and even the same families which provided Lollard suspects in the fifteenth century were still hotspots of radical dissent in the seventeenth, and if we cannot quite see how this tradition was transmitted, that is no reason to deny its existence. More substantially, the way that the Protestant mainstream celebrated and memorialized their Lollard predecessors kept Lollard radicalism alive. The Protestant historian John Foxe carefully recorded how Lollards had formed separatist conventicles, argued passionately for justice for the poor, rejected the use of oaths, deplored any kind of established ministry and in some cases embraced pacifism. If Foxe did not actually endorse these views, nor did he condemn them or edit them out, and it is no coincidence that Foxe himself held some disturbingly radical views: in particular, his conviction – highly unusual for the time – that executing anyone, Catholic, Protestant or wild-eyed heretic, for their religious convictions was wrong. For a century and more, radicals eagerly cited the Lollards he recorded as precedents for their own convictions. If the Lollards did shape the English Reformation, this was how.

Still, let's not get this out of proportion. All of the dots I have been connecting are still dots, a few scattered voices and short lived movements. What drew them together was the extraordinary

breakdown of the 1640s, when all the streams of England's radical Reformation flowed into unison. From the moment when Charles I was forced by military defeat to summon a parliament in 1640, to the point when his son was restored to his vacant throne in 1660, England never had a government that was both willing and able to enforce a uniform religious settlement on the country. And so a century's worth of subterranean radical currents surged into the open. Congregationalist churches sprang up as newly liberated puritans tired of waiting for a national reformation and decided to force the pace. The civil war of 1642–6 sharpened the mood, as 'middle ways' vanished amid the killing. From 1645 onwards, the reorganized parliamentary army itself became a vast armed seminary for apocalyptic radicalism. Once the war was over, it was that army which found itself holding the reins of power. To the horror of most of the nation, the radicals were on the march, and no one was going to stop them.

The most obvious consequence of this was the emergence of a swathe of new movements, some of which would become enduring denominations. This was when the Baptists, now one of the largest global Christian families, were born. The question of adult baptism came back with a vengeance. A minority of Congregationalists were questioning infant baptism; meanwhile, via a quite different route, some perfectionist-mystical sects were also coming to define themselves by the practice of adult baptism. These two baptistic communities were deeply suspicious of each other, but shared practice, and the shared enmity of the rest of the country, slowly forced them together, and they uneasily came to profess a shared identity as 'Baptists'. That name was probably given to them by the other truly significant new sect to emerge from the post-Civil War years, the Quakers, who took all the radical themes we have been tracking to their logical endpoint. They spiritualized most conventional Christian doctrine; abandoned any conventionally structured church, ministry or sacraments; taught a radical doctrine of human equality; professed pacifism, albeit not as steadily as they later liked to recall; and swept aside all religion in favour of the light of Christ which they found dwelling inside everyone. From a standing start in the late 1640s, by 1660 there were tens of thousands of Quakers, and their zealous idealism was already spreading across the world.

For each denomination that endured, however, there were dozens of movements that flared up and died away or were subsumed into the wider culture. These were the years that produced the first-ever campaign for representative democracy (the Levellers); an agrarian commune which hoped to create a world of total equality, virtue and reason by sharing labour and abolishing private property (the Diggers); a mystical movement of self-denial which abandoned any kind of religious practice, individual or collective, while it waited for a new dispensation from God (the Seekers); a revolutionary utopian sect hoping to inaugurate an apocalyptic kingdom of the saints (the Fifth Monarchists); and a great many other groups, real or imagined, dedicated to following particular prophets, to restoring Judaism, to nudism, to moral perfectionism, or to transcending morality altogether. Collectively, their legacy – the true legacy of England's radical Reformation – is irreducible pluralism. Religious toleration of some kind has been an inescapable fact of English life ever since: whether as a point of principle or as a simple concession to reality. Like it or not, England's religious identity is fractured beyond repair. And that is where we still are.

Let me finish with two specific legacies of the 1640–60 period that underline the general point. First, the Jews. England's long-established Jewish population had been expelled by royal order in 1291, and for nearly four centuries the practice of Judaism was illegal. The fact that to be English was by definition to be Christian made possible the creation of 'the Church of England' as the Tudors conceived it. By the mid-seventeenth century, the prospering Jewish mercantile community in the Netherlands was creating a commercial incentive for England's ban to be lifted. But the actual decision was made by Oliver Cromwell, England's Lord Protector from 1653 to 1658, a Congregationalist whose personal commitment to toleration was partial (it certainly did not extend to Catholics) but was also real. Like many other radicals, Cromwell believed that Christ's second coming would be preceded by the mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity. Perhaps

readmitting Jews to England, as he did in 1656 in response to this petition, would help precipitate this? It has not, of course, worked out that way. But it has meant that, ever since, England has been not only a multi-denominational but also a multi-faith country.

A second legacy again touches on Judaism, and on the close ties between the radical Protestant groups in England and the Netherlands. Adam Boreel, the most important leader of the Dutch rationalist group known as the Collegiants, was an Anglophile who had spent a crucial formative period during the 1630s among radical groups in England. In the 1650s, English Quakers paid a return visit, sending missionaries to Amsterdam and opening channels to the Collegiants. In particular, the Quakers befriended a young Dutch Jew whom the Collegiants had taken in after he had been expelled from his synagogue. This man translated a Quaker tract into Hebrew in the hope of converting Jews to Quakerism. The Quakers wrote that he was ‘very friendly’ to their cause, and his own later writings show signs of significant debts to Quaker criticism of the Bible and of conventional Christianity. His name was Baruch Spinoza.

Spinoza is justly famous as the philosophical founding father of modern atheism and rationalism. Yet his debt to the radical Christian traditions represented by the Collegiants and the Quakers was profound. His limpid ethical vision did not so much reject traditional Judaism and Christianity as transcend them. In doing so he was true to the radical Reformation traditions of his friends. He is a reminder of a truth that applies not only throughout the English-speaking world but even beyond it: all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, whether we like it or not, are children of one or other of the English Reformations.