“‘bere we þe cros’: The Persistence of the Cross in English Ritual and Religious Practices from Bede to the Reformation”

David Black

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“bere we þe cros’: The Persistence of the Cross in English Ritual and Religious Practices from Bede to the Reformation”

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

May 2018

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Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Michael J. Galgano for all of his assistance with this work. He freely shared knowledge and insights into the political and religious world of the English Reformation, and granted me his continual support, patience, and advice. Without his backing and reassurances, this work would never have been completed. Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Alison Sandman and Dr. Andrew Witmer, my committee members who generously agreed to lend me their time and guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Gabriel Lanier and my classmates in Hist. 673, who helped me develop this project from an impulsive fragment of an idea into a genuine avenue of study. Though they are too numerous to name, I would also like to thank the teachers and professors from throughout my academic life who have challenged me to be more skeptical, ask more questions, and work harder. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my wife, Diana Black. Her unwavering love and support, toleration for my long days of class, research, and writing, and willingness to serve as an editor to some very rough drafts have meant the world to me.
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Abstract

Long before Christian missionaries arrived in England in the 7th century, the pagan population recognized the cross as a potent magical symbol. As a result, proselytizers shrewdly used the population’s familiarity with the cross, and their understandings of its power, to encourage converts to the new religion. Over the ensuing centuries of English Christian dominance, the magical aspects of the cross continued to develop both mythologically and theologically, without ever losing connection to their pagan origins. The Crusades, both through the propaganda of preachers and the massive influx of True Cross Relics, contributed in a substantial way to new beliefs about the cross and its role in Christian practice through a renewed emphasis on pilgrimage. The power and centrality of the cross in Christianity was not questioned in any substantial way until the late 14th century when the Lollards, following the work of John Wycliffe, began objecting to crosses. The Lollards argued that the time and money that the church poured into pilgrimages and the production and maintenance of extravagantly decorated crosses and reliquaries distracted from the true purpose of Christianity, which was social benevolence. The Church had long regarded images as books for the illiterate, but the Lollards felt that an educated congregation with vernacular books could dispense with crosses. Though the Lollards were persecuted as heretics, their ideas not only survived, but gained prominence during the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations. At the outset of the Reformation, Henry VIII had no desire to purge crosses or associated rituals from the Church. After his death, however, his son and heir, Edward VI, did. With the backing of influential religious figures such as Thomas Cranmer and Hugh Latimer, Edward encouraged iconoclasm throughout England and instituted a number of doctrinal changes.
to the new Anglican faith. As zealous reformers eliminated Catholic and pagan elements from Christian worship, the monarchy adapted the cross to become a symbol of the king and crown. Consequently, the cross continued to survive in England, but had new connotations: less magical and more suited for the increasingly modern and secular world of post-Reformation England.
Introduction

During the English Reformation, iconoclasts destroyed religious artwork in vast quantities as a means of purifying the recently created Anglican church of Catholic and pagan elements. With the king as the new head of the church, the secular authorities encouraged this behavior, progressing the Reformation over the objection of many of the more conservative elements of society. One of the most prominent Christian symbols, and therefore one of the most contentious, was the cross. In the form of altar crosses, personal crucifixes, roods, grave markers, and numerous other forms besides, the cross suffused the lives of Early Modern English men and women, and was not easily extracted. The permeation of the cross in both religious and social life was nothing new in the sixteenth century: the cross had been a fundamental part of English existence for centuries. Recognizing both the importance and power of the cross, the English secular authorities did not seek its ultimate destruction, but rather hoped to harness the cross to exalt the monarchy. In this regard, the actions of the state reflected how the original Christians in England similarly redefined the cross to suit their own purposes in the conversion process.

The cross was not a symbol unique to Christianity, and was already being used as a magical token by the pagans of England when missionaries arrived in seventh century. Since the cross was a familiar symbol for the English people, proselytizers at this time were able to redefine its magical attributes as examples of the Christian God’s capacity, and thereby use it as a means of obtaining converts. The approach that missionaries took in converting the English population to Christianity, how they used the cross and pagan
rituals to minimize hostility to the new faith, and thereby obtain eager converts, was echoed by sixteenth century reformers. Thus, to understand the centrality of the cross in English religious life on the eve of the Reformation, the passions that it engendered on both sides of the debates over iconoclasm, and how the state attempted to harness its symbolic power, it is important to understand the cross’s roots and developments.

From its origins, Christianity was a monotheistic religion from an obscure Roman province, born from the foundations of Judaism and requiring belief in a crucified and resurrected man-God from the even more isolated and improbable town of Nazareth. These humble beginnings notwithstanding, by the fourth century Christianity had become the primary religion of Rome, which was the most notable European power of the day. By the seventh, it was making headway into some of the most remote areas of the former Roman territories. Compared to the later spread of Islam, this pace seems fairly sluggish, yet the degree of success that Christianity achieved in this relatively short period of time was not due to conquest, but a comparatively peaceful spread of ideas.\(^1\) Of course, Christianity was aided in its proliferation by the political and military activities of powerful rulers, such as Constantine and Clovis, but their purposes were not expressly religious, and they did not force conversion at the point of a sword.\(^2\) Christianity spread by virtue of its message, the guile of its proselytizers, and the use of universally recognizable symbols and motifs. This process was especially true on the island that

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would eventually become England, Scotland, and Wales. Missionaries used pre-existing symbols and rituals to draw the population together into a Christian society.

When the Christians began making forays into England, they brought with them not only a system of beliefs, but an extensive body of work including Old Testament texts, the gospels, a corpus of writings from the Church fathers and theologians, an extensive mythology, and a cultural heritage derived from both Greco-Roman civilization and their Judeo-Christian worldview. Additionally, they had experience garnered from several centuries of experience proselytizing.

Geographically on the outskirts of European society, England was literally the edge of the Western world. The Roman presence had been relatively brief, and its conquest of the island far from complete, making England even more untamed and unknown than the isolated places on the continent. It is remarkable that a small number of Christian proselytizers could successfully convert the island to Christianity, which speaks to the power of their message. It was not until the Reformation, however, that Christians truly challenged the pagan beliefs and rituals of the population. The intervening years had done little to undermine or alter the practices of Christianity. As a result, the Christianity of the early sixteenth century looked remarkably similar to the Christianity of the seventh century, which, in terms of the liturgical year, religious rites, and symbols, also bore a striking resemblance to pre-Christian England. When it came to spring equinox rituals, belief in demons, the practical value of magic, and the veneration of images, Reformers found much of the population intractable. English men and women were not easily convinced to abandon the practices that had safeguarded them and determined the structure of their lives.
Early Christians made use of a great many different symbols, such as the fish or *ichthys*, the chi-rho, and the tau-rho or *staurogram*. By the time of the conversion of England, however, the dominant symbol of Christianity was the cross, which had largely replaced the previous symbols.\(^3\) In the New Testament, Jesus was crucified, which is to say, killed by being violently nailed to a cross for sowing discord. For the Romans in Jerusalem, the cross was merely an instrument of torture and execution, reserved for making an example of criminals. Though intended to be disgraceful and deterrent for other potential insurgents who might follow in his footsteps, Jesus’s crucifixion instead became the cornerstone of the Christian faith. In Christian mythology, Jesus’s death on the cross set the stage for his subsequent resurrection, and thus his ultimate conquest over death. As a result, crucifixion and resurrection were invariably linked, and both were necessary in Christianity; according to Paul: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”\(^4\) Far from being a mere gibbet, then, the cross was the means of a Christian's salvation. Only by, through, and with the cross could sins be forgiven, damnation avoided, and the prophecies of the Old Testament fulfilled. It was a sign of eternal life, an object of supreme power, and proof of the benign God’s love and commitment. This message came with the cross as proselytizers spread throughout Europe, and eventually the world.

\(^3\) MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, 194-195, and Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). For the sake of clarity, it is worth laying out definitions to distinguish between the images and symbols being discussed. A “cross” should need no explanation; it is the standard Christian image representing the actual instrument which the Romans used in the execution of criminals, including Jesus of Nazareth. A “crucifix” is a cross which displays the body of Jesus hanging upon it. A “rood” was typically a crucifix, though occasionally it was a cross, which hung above the choir or choir screen in Catholic churches. It was not unusual, however, for authors in the late Medieval or, less frequently, Early Modern period to use “rood” as a synonym for any displayed cross or crucifix.

\(^4\) NIV, Rom. 4:25,
As a symbol, the cross had advantages over previously used dominant Christian iconography. First, it was simple: because the cross can literally be formed with two lines; it was easily drawn, carved, or made using gestures. Second, it did not rely on knowledge of the Greek alphabet like the chi-rho or staurogram, allowing it to cross language barriers and cultures with relative ease. Perhaps most importantly, though not unrelated to its simplicity, it was a symbol already well known to cultures throughout Europe, allowing proselytizers to adapt powerful native symbols, drawing parallels between Christianity and pre-existing systems of belief.\(^5\) As a result, Christians missionaries had an existing framework on which to build, since “it is easier to put new meaning into an old symbol than to introduce a new symbol.”\(^6\) Though allowing for relatively easy conversion, this method of adapting the cross was imperfect, and in many ways acted as a double edged sword.

Christian missionaries recognized the difficulties inherent in the conversion process. Peoples who knew nothing of Judaism or Jerusalem would not reliably convert merely by being told that a dead man had fulfilled Jewish prophecies. By making use of existent symbolism, worship sites, and mythology, Christians did not force converting populations to abandon their former beliefs, but merely to alter their understanding. This strategy also enabled a small number of proselytizers to convert large numbers of people, the logistics of which required them to employ a relatively peaceful model. The result was that, though populations became Christians, they did not have to fundamentally

\(^5\) The cross was also present in cultures outside of Europe, and may have assisted conversion processes around the globe. As an example, see Cécile Fromont, “Under the Sign of the Cross in the Kingdom of the Kongo; Religious Conversion and Visual Correlation in Early Modern Central Africa,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 59/60 (Spring/Autumn 2011): 109-123.

change their worldviews, methods of worship, or rituals. Religious acts were molded to take on new significance, but even as they evolved, these actions retained countless layers of intricate social and religious meaning. Through their subsumption by Christianity, symbols and rituals became increasingly multi-textured expressions of belief. The life and death of Jesus and the salvation offered by the Christian God may have become the dominant denotation of the cross, holidays, and religious rites, but they did not overwrite the previous meanings. Even the places formerly associated with pagan worships often became the centers for the new Christian faith. Consequently, becoming Christian did not necessarily entail abandoning paganism, but merely readjusting pagan beliefs to fit a few context.

This conversion method was effective, and helped to create a system of worship that remained largely unchallenged in England for nearly a millennium. The cross, along with all residual pagan practices absorbed by the Church, eventually began to come under attack in the centuries leading up to the English Reformation. The rise of education and literacy, the social upheaval and religious reexamination affected by the Black Death, and a nascent recognition of English identity all began to coalesce in the 14th and 15th centuries to challenge the supremacy of Roman Catholic hegemony. In the late 14th century, Lollards were the first significant group in England to question traditional religion, and instead advocate for a textually-based faith, which entailed purging Christianity of all the elements that were not found in the Bible, including symbols and ritual. Believing that crosses were idolatrous, they championed their removal from churches, an exhortation that occasionally inspired bouts of iconoclasm. Though the Lollards were persecuted by the religious authorities of their time, many of their ideas,
including their proscriptions against the cross, survived the intervening century, and were taken up by reformers during the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations.

With a renewed vigor, and support from the highest office in the land, crosses and other religious imagery were condemned by reformers. As literacy rates rose and Bibles, including translations into the vernacular, became more common, many people throughout England became convinced that crosses were unnecessary “popery” which detracted from “true” Christianity. Beyond a belief in the idolatry of images, iconoclasm allowed the Reformers within the English church to advance their religious and political agenda. As a result, roods, crosses, and crucifixes throughout the land, joined by religious sculptures and paintings, were broken, smashed, and burned in enormous quantities. This iconoclasm largely emptied England of pre-Reformation religious art, a loss that has been keenly felt, and intellectually captivating, for historians.

Many scholars have been captivated by the strain of iconoclasm which Reformers used as strategy for Reformers during the English Reformation. The success of the iconoclasts during the sixteenth and seventeenth century has deprived English historians of the religious statuary, paintings, and carvings that provide insight into religious life for historians in other European countries. At the same time, however, the rampant and sustained attacks on images has created a fascinating line of inquiry of its own. Why did the destruction of potential idols grip the English reformers so strongly and what were their main motivators? Who were the primary offenders? To what degree was the movement encouraged by the secular and religious authorities, and to what degree was iconoclasm embraced or undertaken by the general population? Was the impulse to
destroy images widespread and popular, or was it the actions of a small number of zealots?

That the cross played a prominent role in the life of English men and women from the inception of Christianity up through the Reformation is a fact that has long been recognized by scholars. Contemporary writings from men such as Bede and Æelfric, as well as existing material such as *The Dream of the Rood* attest to the prominence of the cross during the Anglo-Saxon period. Language barriers and the relative dearth of material has made this a narrow but deep area of scholarship. William Stevens addressed the topic more than a century ago, and Éamonn Ó Carragáin began to take the subject of the importance of the cross to Anglo-Saxons more seriously in the latter half of the twentieth century. Recently the torch has been taken up by scholars such as Karen L. Jolly, Sarah Larratt Keefer, and Catherine Karkov. In addition to their own contributions to the field, these latter three have drawn together the work of various scholars in three volumes dedicated to the subject. The focus of these scholars remains steadfastly on the Anglo-Saxon period, and they do not address later developments which took place in England to change or challenge the perspectives and uses of the cross explored in these works. Similarly, English Reformation-era scholars generally have not taken their

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analysis back into the Anglo-Saxon period, and as a result, the body of work in this field has remained largely separate from analysis of the cross in the latter period.

There is a much greater degree of overlap between scholars of the Lollards and the Reformation, to the point that they can be difficult to disentangle. Anne Hudson’s excellent work, *The Premature Reformation* (1989) demands attention, forcing scholars to situate religious changes under the Tudors within the broader religious developments which began during the life of John Wycliffe. Consequently, Reformation historians have long recognized the similarities in perspectives on images between the teachings of the former group and the iconoclastic fervor of the latter period. The extensive writings of Margaret Aston represent the most coherent analysis of Reformation iconoclasm, including its roots in Lollardy, particularly *Lollards and Reformers* (1984) and *England’s Iconoclasts* (1988), while the posthumously published *Broken Idols of the Reformation* (2016) forms a fitting capstone to a life dedicated to the subject.

There are two works in particular which more directly address sixteenth century English iconoclasm, popular Christianity, and deeply ingrained vestiges of paganism. The first is Keith Thomas’s seminal work *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Thomas asked probing questions about the nature of belief in the sixteenth century in order to determine how religion actually functioned, rather than how the church asserted and prescribed it to function. Thomas placed belief in a social context, in order to establish the true religion

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of the people, who lived in a world replete with magic, demons, faeries, and, of course, witches. ¹⁰

While Thomas provided acute insight into social religious activity, he did so at the expense of exploring the full range of sanctioned church religion. Recognizing this oversight, Eamon Duffy used the work of Thomas to situate his own research, yet greatly expanded upon it. Among historiography of religion and magic, iconoclasm, and the English Reformation more broadly, Duffy’s The Stripping of the Altars stands out as particularly excellent. This work seeks not only to explicate the destructive impulses of the 16th century, but to situate them more securely within the religious world. Duffy considers the magical world of popular religion as described by Thomas, and combines it with an exploration of religion as depicted in the writings of the most powerful or vocal members of society, and synthesizes them to display “something of the richness and complexity of the religious system by which men and women structured their experiences in the world.” ¹¹ Rather than stress the elements of religion over which the church had little, or no, control, Duffy displays how pre-Reformation Catholicism was itself an intricate combination of religion and magic, which provided meaning, structure, and profundity to the lives of English men and women. The result is an impressive volume, a masterfully constructed and vivid exploration of early modern religion, and the Protestant movement that so thoroughly dismantled it.

The current work hopes to contribute to this area of study in two particular ways. First, it develops the place of the cross in English society. Even at the origins of

Christianity in England, the cross had a plethora of meanings and uses. At the center of Christian symbolism was the cross, and the population of England easily found a place for it in their cosmology. For a variety of reasons, the story of Jesus - the anthropomorphic God of death and resurrection - and the religion which resulted from his death on the cross - was accepted by the population of England fairly readily. Religious adherents could count on the cross for numerous feats of magic, protection from demons, and a means of accessing salvation. Different messages of the new religion, such as an emphasis on living simple and peaceful lives, or the admonition to respect secular authorities, made Christianity appealing to rulers and the lower classes alike. As they converted, Englishmen and women embraced the cross, but imbued it with new meanings specific to their culture, society, and particular pagan beliefs. As the centuries progressed, through crusades, pilgrimages, mythologies, and even theological developments, men and women throughout England continue to build on understandings of the cross. Along with liturgical rituals, crosses and pilgrimages became Christianity. Without understanding the deep importance of the Cross, on a religious, national, and magical level, modern readers cannot fully grasp the change that Reformers were forcing upon a largely unwilling population. When reformers attacked the cross, both literally and figuratively, in the sixteenth century, they were waging an assault on the underlying beliefs as well, which were deeply ingrained in the very existence of the English people.

Second, it shows how, far from hoping for the complete eradication of the cross and all reverence for, secular authorities instead sought to harness the cross for their own purposes. By keeping the cross as a visible symbol of the monarchy, the crown hoped to turn veneration of the cross into veneration for the monarch, and subsequently for the
institution of the monarchy. This subsumption, rather than extirpation, functioned to reinforce the idea that the king - or eventually queen - was the head of the Church, and therefore had spiritual and temporal control over the entirety of the land. Using a close examination of the cross, therefore, we can gain access to the successes, failures, and strife of the sixteenth century in new and enlightening ways.

Chapter one will examine the role that the cross played in the conversion of England, and how its meaning changed and grew over the coming centuries. The first part considers how and why the people were so accepting of the cross, as well as how it was used and understood before it was conceived of in a Christian context. It then explores how paganism, theologians, and Anglo-Saxon society worked in conjunction to imbue the cross with additional meanings, both religious and cultural. These meanings would work together to make the cross virtually ubiquitous throughout the land.

The second part of the chapter looks at the power of the cross as both *crux exemplata*, the physical cross, and *crux usualis*, the signing of the cross with the hands. It examines the cross as a potent magical symbol in pagan England, and Christianity enhanced that understanding, especially during the time of the crusades. To assist in marketing the Crusades, preachers referred to the cross extensively and reinforced its protective and apotropaic magic. Finally, the chapter investigates the influx of True Cross relics that resulted from the Crusades, and how they further enhanced the cross’s status, but also simultaneously encouraged the first assaults on the symbol of the cross.

Chapter two is primarily concerned with the cross during the initial Lollard movement. It examines the world of John Wycliffe and his followers, including societal changes and how they helped to impact the Lollard conception of the cross as detrimental
to the “true” form of Christianity. In examining newfound objections to the cross, the chapter investigates how theologians, primarily Thomas Aquinas, and expanding Christian mythology changed Christian perceptions of the cross to make worshipping it acceptable. Furthermore, it shows how Lollards laid the groundwork for the English Reformation of the early-mid 16th century through their insistence on vernacular texts and their attempts to purify Christianity of non-scriptural elements.

Chapter three looks at the cross during the English Reformation, through the reign of Edward VI, when the Reformation reached its peak of iconoclasm. It highlights the inconsistencies of the Reformation in regards to the cross, and how the population remained largely loyal to their symbol, despite the assaults. The chapter looks extensively at the ceremony of creeping to the cross, including how the ceremony was conducted and its contentious place at the center of Easter celebrations. This chapter shows how the leading Reformers, especially Thomas Cranmer, sought to change perceptions of the cross, and remove it from the practice of Christianity, with limited success.

The conclusion draws the story together, showing how the cross is the ideal symbol to illustrate how the survival of pagan practices, albeit heavily modified, caused resistance and friction during the Reformation. It looks at the importance of symbols and rituals, as well as how the attacks against them played into the overarching narrative of the Reformation. Finally, it explores how, as Henry VIII, and later Edward, sought to replace the pope as the head of the church, so too did the monarchy attempt to co-opt ritual and symbolism to advance a secular and nationalistic agenda.

Only by examining the roots of the cross in England can we begin to develop an understanding of the meaning behind its persecution during the time of the Reformation.
The cross was magical, powerful, a national and religious symbol, a centerpiece of religious life, and a unifying force for society. Though unique in the particulars, England is by no means exceptional. Each society that has accepted the cross has done so by adopting it into their existing social framework. An acceptance of Christianity, or any religion, does not simply overwrite the pre-existing structures that help to guide and define daily life. Religion can be changed in crucial, though often subtle, ways in order to have it make sense in a new time and place.
Chapter 1 – Pre- and Early-Christian England

Next, if you wanted some peculiar person to ride by, there might have come a crusader who had promised to deliver the grave of God. You would have expected the cross on his surcoat, no doubt, but you might not have realized that he was so delighted with the whole affair that he put the same symbol almost everywhere that it could be made to go. Like a new Boy Scout transported with enthusiasm, he would have stuck the cross on his escutcheon, on his coat, on his helm, on his saddle, and on the horse’s curb. - T. H. White, The Candle in the Wind (1940)

The roots of sixteenth century English iconoclasm can be traced back centuries, and much of the rhetoric of iconoclasts was built on the same complaints that John Wycliffe and the Lollards had directed at Catholic symbolism a hundred and fifty years prior. Yet to fully grasp how deeply entrenched the cross was in English society, and why the Lollards, facing institutionalized political hostility, met with such sustained and virtually impregnable resistance, we must look back to the very foundational centuries of Christianity in England. During this time, missionaries promoted the cross as a more effective magic than that which was offered by the pagan gods. As a result, the cross became the defining symbol of Christianity, and therefore Christian magic. The mission of the English Reformers went far deeper than that of the superficial crosses made of wood, stone, or precious metals. They were fighting against the very foundation of Christianity as it had been understood and practiced by generations of Englishmen and women, going back nearly a thousand years. To understand the uphill battle that first the Lollards, then the nascent Anglican church had to wage to dislodge the deeply entrenched

13 Though the term England is anachronistic when discussing the Anglo-Saxon period, in order to avoid confusion and to keep terms consistent, I have chosen to employ it to describe the geographic region that would become England in later centuries.
symbol of the cross in England, it is necessary to understand how the cross came to be the potent magical symbol that it was, and what it meant to English Christians.

Christianity before the Reformation was, at its core, a religion based upon works. To be a Christian was to attend religious services, express belief in the divinity of Jesus, and take part in the rituals, processions, and holidays prescribed by the church.\(^\text{14}\) Such a religion, far from challenging older pagan beliefs, actually complimented them, stressing the importance of such activities as offering sacrifices, burning incense to appease spirits, or using certain objects or symbols to protect one’s home. The lack of formal, dogmatic Christian liturgy and practices led to an easy consonance between older belief systems and Christianity, the result of which was the creation of a largely syncretic religion. Rather than attempting to supplant the pagan religions, the work of early Christian missionaries was often to show how Christianity was consistent with the English person’s spiritual worldview, yet superior to it. The magic of the saints, prayers, and the cross were therefore marketed by these missionaries as more potent than pleas to pagan gods, and more effective than their rituals and charms.\(^\text{15}\)

Indeed, the popular forms of Christian magic espoused by the proselytizers was not only compatible with pagan magics, but largely based upon them. That early missionaries sought to subsume native culture and religion into Christianity is attested to in the oft-cited letter from Pope Gregory I to Mellitus in 601, when the latter began his missionary work in the region that would become England. Gregory exhorts that “the


temples of the idols among the people should on no account be destroyed.” Instead, the idols themselves were to be removed, and replaced with Christian relics, and their pagan holidays exchanged for Saints Days, and the “sacrifice [of] beasts to the Devil” supplanted by killing animals for food and giving thanks to God. In effect, the Christianizing of England was based on providing paganism with a Christian veneer, camouflaging rather than displacing.

Obviously, peoples and societies do not surrender or allow the supersession of their religious beliefs easily; they must have a compelling reason to do so. Historically, forcing conversion has often been done at the point of a sword, but in this case, the conversion process was less dramatic. In addition to complementing pre-existing systems of belief, Christianity brought a number of attractive promises, not least of all its conception of an afterlife. Life in the seventh century was dangerous, difficult, often painful, filled with loss and suffering, and generally very short. Whereas Germanic religions focused on rewards for great deeds in battle, Christianity allowed for and remunerated a more serene life. A farmer who lived by Christian virtues, worked hard, provided for his family, and died could still be assured of a celestial bounty beyond his earthly conceptions without having achieved any glory on the battlefield. As England became increasingly unified and settled, a more peaceful and contented populace also


18 The conversion process was by no means straightforward, but occurred over time, with Christianity spreading unevenly and occasionally encountering pockets of resistance, see Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England.”
suited rulers, who appreciated the messages concerning secular obedience that Christianity offered. The appeal of Christianity for the people of contemporary England was further enhanced by proselytizers promoting the Christian God as more forgiving and less judgmental and fickle than pagan deities, who were increasingly perceived as demons or malignant spirits. Tragedies still occurred, obviously, and lives were still difficult, but Christians believed that they were conducted under the care of a benevolent deity. While God’s actions towards humans were not always understood, they were ultimately perceived as being grounded in love and justice. The omnipotence and compassion of God ensured that He would always triumph over evil. Pagan gods did not offer this same consolation. An unconditionally loving deity, who provides for the less fortunate and rewards even the simplest of farmers heaven was certainly a powerful motivation for conversion, so that by the end of the seventh century, all the English kingdoms had been Christianized.

The importance of a relatively peaceful conversion process cannot be overstated, as it allowed sufficient time for syncretic, albeit predominantly Christian, religions to result. Influence from various Christian traditions - Gallic, Roman, and Irish - as well as local pagan belief systems, molded each other, eventually leading to a heterogeneously Christian country in which many pagan beliefs thrived under the guise of Christianity.

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19 See Matt 22:21, “Jesus said ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's’” and Rom. 13:1 “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God and those which exist are established by God.”


21 For explorations of the heterogeneity of Anglo-Saxon Christianity see John Blair, Church in Anglo-Saxon Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Martin Carver, Alex Sanmark and Sarah
Indeed, many Christian holidays retain pagan traces even today, such as Christmas coinciding with the winter solstice, or the celebrations of fertility at Easter (named for Eostre, a Germanic goddess of fertility, and exemplified by the proverbial reproductive fervor of rabbits) during the spring equinox.\textsuperscript{22} It is in this environment of harmony between monotheism and mysticism that we see the flourishing of belief in the magic of the cross and crucifix; a Christian symbol with a distinct potency of its own, grafted onto an older system of charms and mysticism to result in the most omnipresent and powerful magical device in Anglo-Saxon England.\textsuperscript{23}

Though it found new life under the guise of Christian theology, the cross was by no means an original symbol when missionaries brought new associations with it to pagan England, but rather reflected previously held associations with magical charms. Images of crossed lines or circles can be traced to numerous pre-Christian societies and religious traditions, such as those of Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian people, and the same was true in England. It was an image associated with astronomy, agricultural seasons, the equinoxes and solstices, and other similar occasions and principles which

\textsuperscript{22} Bede, in explaining why the English people called the fourth month “Eosturmonath,” explained that it was in reference to Eostre, “in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate it that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance.” Bede, \textit{The Reckoning of Time}, translated by Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 54.

\textsuperscript{23} It is important to note the difficulty in establishing whether writers are discussing a cross or a crucifix, the iconography of which existed since at least the tenth century. Both symbols were prevalent during the entire timeframe being discussed in this work, and rarely did authors distinguish between the two. While I will occasionally do so where necessary, often the distinction will be insignificant for the purposes of this work and I will default to the term “cross.”. The presence or absence of an effigy of the crucified Christ on the cross does not have significant bearing on the potency of the symbol itself. Even could scholars determine which image in particular is being perceived, we cannot capture the thoughts, prayers, or meditations of medieval or early modern penitents in order to distinguish whether their reflections are on the entirety of the crucifix, the crucified man, or the gibbet itself. See Barbara C. Raw, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography and the Art of the Monastic Revival} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) for an exploration of the prevalence of artistic representations of the crucifix through various mediums in Anglo-Saxon England.
remained fundamentally critical in the overwhelmingly agrarian society of England.\textsuperscript{24} This symbolism was buttressed by the writings of the church fathers, such as Gregory of Nyssa, who extrapolates on the book of Ephesians, explaining that “[Paul] describes by the figure of the Cross the power that controls and holds together the universe… all the furthest bounds of the things that are, are ruled and sustained by Him Who gave an example of this unspeakable and mighty power in the figure of the Cross.”\textsuperscript{25} The cross, then, as the symbol of the crucified and risen Jesus, accented previously held beliefs by tying them together with Christianity, and showing how Christianity was applicable to, and in harmony with, the natural world. Beyond this, the fact that the cross was such a prominent symbol before the introduction of Christianity to the area merely helped to stress the omnipresence of the Christian God, even before He was known as such. In a similar fashion, older mythologies were likewise tied to the cross, such as can be seen with the Gosworth Cross from northern England, where scenes of Norse mythology exist alongside scenes of the crucifixion.\textsuperscript{26} The melding of pagan and Christian beliefs,


however, is perhaps nowhere more prominent and explicit than in the Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of the Rood*.

While precise dates for this Northumbrian text cannot be determined, most scholars believe that *Rood* stems from the eighth century (though the oldest surviving text is from the tenth). In its verses, the unnamed speaker is confronted by the anthropomorphized True Cross in a dream, who recounts the story of the crucifixion as seen from its own perspective. The scholar Richard North has argued that this depiction of the cross is actually derived from mythology surrounding the god Ingui, who was cyclically married to the earth goddess each spring, and killed each fall before being resurrected/replaced the following year. The death of Ingui took place on a sacred “world tree,” an object of Norse legend which was imbued with an animating spirit. Even at the most superficial level, there exist distinct parallels between the story of Ingui and that of Jesus. Both existed as incarnate deities, both were sacrificed and hung upon wooden structures, and both were destined to be resurrected. In an agrarian society, this cycle of life and death is more than merely mythological, as a farmer’s life is ruled by the cyclical nature of the seasons and inseparably conjoined to that of the earth. A late spring, early winter, or poor harvest was often the difference between subsistence and starvation; life and death. That early Christians in England, as elsewhere, adapted existing mythologies to proselytize, is certain. The similarities that this particular mythology provided thus gave early Christians a perfect opportunity to explain the actions of their own deity, without forcing the converts to abandon every aspect of their religion. That some of the ideas and beliefs from that mythology may have spilled over into the new, Christian,

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religion seems unavoidable, especially in a largely illiterate, almost exclusively agricultural society dependent upon oral tradition.

In *The Dream of the Rood*, many of the magical attributes that the cross would carry with it for subsequent centuries already existed. Speaking to the dreamer, the cross informs him that:

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Now the time has come
that I will be honoured far and wide
by men over the earth and all this glorious creation;
they will pray to this beacon. On me the Son of God
suffered for a while; because of that I am glorious now,
towering under the heavens, and I am able to heal
each one of those who is in awe of me.28
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The cross as an object, therefore, is imbued with healing properties that come from, but are not dependent on, God or prayer. This indicates that the capacity for performing magical acts was perceived as emanating from the object itself, and this understanding would not be challenged for centuries. Later in the poem, the speaker admits, “I prayed to the tree with a happy spirit then,” a sure indication that the prayers were not intended for Jesus, whom the cross represented.29 By the time this poem was written, Christianity had become the established religion in Anglo-Saxon England. The process, started by missionaries but solidified by the rulers, was widely credited to one man in particular, namely King Oswald.

29 “Dream of the Rood.” It is important to note the linguistic confusion here. The Old English word *rod* (cross) and *arbor* (tree) were often used interchangeably. While that convention adds weight to the overall argument of older pagan myths being incorporated into Christian elements, the act of praying “to the tree” should not be conflated with animism or worshipping the spirit of the tree itself, See North, *Heathen Gods*, 275-276.
The Christian King Oswald was a Northumbrian ruler who came to power in 633, when he and a small army defeated the larger forces under Cadwallon, a “rapacious and bloody tyrant” and “godless” king who had rejected the true faith. Upon his victory, Oswald ruled for a peaceful eight years, during which he encouraged and aided the spread of Christianity, before being killed in battle and becoming venerated as a saint. Many writers, including Bede, linked the actions of Oswald before this battle, which occurred at a place named Heavenfield, directly to the cross, and the greater Christian brotherhood. According to Bede, before the battle took place, Oswald built a large wooden cross and erected it at the battlefield, holding it upright with his own two hands while his men buried the base. Once the cross was standing, Oswald prayed to it with all his men for victory, which was, of course, granted to them despite being outnumbered. In recounting this tale, Bede has Oswald become for England what Constantine was for the Roman Empire: the first Christian ruler, guided to victory through divine intervention. After this event, Oswald’s cross became a relic for the Anglo-Saxons, and stories circulated about how it was imbued with healing properties. Ailing men and animals were cured by drinking water to which chips from the cross were added, and broken bones mended by mere proximity to moss which grew on the cross.

Bede’s account was not, however, the only tale that existed in regards to the battle at Heavenfield, and the alternate version is worth mentioning. In his Life of St. Columba, Adomán of Iona recounts a slightly different version, which does not include the cross, but serves to tie England with the Christian tradition. Instead of a cross, the night before the battle, Oswald has a vision of St. Columba, who assures him of his victory using the

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31 Bede, History of the English Church, 142-144.
words which God said to Joshua on Moses’s death, when he became the leader of the tribes of Israel. At the same time, however, Adomnán connects Oswald to Jesus, stating that Oswald and twelve of his longtime companions were the only Christians in England at the time of the battle, and the rest of his army only converted following the battle. While the discrepancy between these contemporary accounts casts doubt on the factual nature of both, they are in agreement that the victory was a miraculous event which led to the Christianization of England as a whole. That Adomnán does not mention the cross, or draw an explicit connection to Constantine (aside from the similar, but by no means unique, story of a heavenly vision the night before a battle) may have actually served to enhance the event, since readers of one version would also likely be familiar with the other. While Oswald’s cross was exceptional, by virtue of the part it played in Oswald’s victory, the magical properties of all crosses were already well established in Anglo-Saxon England.

Though Bede and Adomnán approached the story of Oswald in different ways, they were, in effect, doing the same thing. Both worked to create a national identity through the spread and importance of Christianity. This shared faith would help draw together the various peoples and cultures across England, though the process would take centuries and never truly be complete. Additionally, these two authors situated the newly Christianized, Anglo-Saxon England into the historical narrative of Christianity. They were, in effect, trying the land to a faith and tradition that had existed for centuries.

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England was to be a Christian Empire, just as the Roman Empire had been under Constantine; their lineage could be traced back to Joshua and Moses. Bede placed the cross, an outward symbol of faith, at the center of this conversion process, and it featured prominently both architecturally in his monasterial setting, as well as in his writing.\textsuperscript{34} This prominence was not restricted to the work of Bede, and was a visible and prominent Christianizing force throughout England.

One of the most visible ways this adoration of the cross would be born out was through the erection of massive stone crosses, such as the famous Ruthwell Cross (Fig. 1), which would declare the faith for any who perceived it. These served as outward expressions of the conversion to Christianity, changing and dominating the very landscape of the island. As more areas and people converted to the new religion, these impressive symbols of Christianity multiplied, turning England into a perceptibly Christian nation from an early period. Beyond that, these crosses had a practical value as well, since they could serve as wayshrines for travelers. The crosses offered both the guarantee of safety and markers of civilization through the shared faith in a dangerous and unpredictable land. Those in need of protection could pray for it at the crosses, and those in need of rest could take it in the shadow of these monuments, assured that the aegis it provided would keep them from all harm.\textsuperscript{35}

Beyond these monumental stone crosses, the sign was literally built into the very foundations of churches. They adorned massive stone slabs used as markers for


internment and as altarpieces. Churches themselves, the central place of worship and increasingly the central structure in towns, were built in the shape of a cross. Cemeteries, and often towns, were marked with crosses at their four corners, as well as a large cross being constructed at the center. Amulets and rings often had crosses etched on them, crosses were interspersed in magical formulae, and prayer books used the cross to mark times when people should cross themselves while reading. Additionally, the sixth council

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36See the work of Peter F. Ryder, who works as an independent researcher and buildings archaeologist and has cataloged a number of these slabs as they are unearthed through archaeological digs. Though neither an academic nor historian, Ryder provides an interesting look at how cross-decorated stone slabs were used, and often re-used as building materials during later expansions of church buildings, especially in West Yorkshire and Durham. See Peter F. Ryder, The Cross Slabs of Brancepeth, (n.p.: Broomlee Publications, 2009); Peter F. Ryder, The Medieval Cross Slab Grave Cover in County Durham, Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland, Research Report no. 1 (1985), Peter F. Ryder, Medieval Cross Slab Grave Covers in West Yorkshire, West Yorkshire Archaeology Service, 1991, and Peter F. Ryder, “Some Further Medieval Cross Slabs in County Durham,” Durham Archaeological Journal 10 (1994): 43-53.
of Chalk Hythe in 816 made any document “confirmed by the sign of the sacred cross of Christ” legally binding.\textsuperscript{37} As early as the eighth century, the prevalence of the cross among the Anglo-Saxons was noted by Huneberc of Heidenheim in her work on the life of St. Willibald. In this work, Hunebarc relates the story that, that as a baby, Willibald suffered from a serious illness, and was healed only when his parents offered him in supplication to the cross: “And this they did, not in the church but at the foot of the Cross, for on the estates of the nobles and good men of the Saxon race it is a custom to have a cross, which is dedicated to our Lord and held in great reverence, erected on some prominent spot for the convenience of those who wish to pray daily before it.” \textsuperscript{38}

As a result of all of these uses and features, the cross was the most ubiquitous symbol in England during this time period, attesting to, if not necessarily its potency, at least its importance. Even these physical representations, of which many survive, do not give an adequate understanding of how ubiquitous the cross was in the lives of Christians. Of no less importance than these tangible crosses, \textit{crux exemplata}, was the manual signing of the cross, \textit{crux usualis}.\textsuperscript{39}

Whereas the physical cross was an external charm that could passively ward off evil, making the sign of the cross was generally an expression of inner faith, and as such it was a means of harnessing faith as either a shield or a weapon, depending on the


\textsuperscript{39} Stevens, 20
context. Not surprisingly, the line between weapon and shield blurred significantly, and the legacy of the *crux usualis* as the supreme symbol of Christian magic expanded over the centuries. The use of the cross in this capacity comes down to subsequent generations through many of the stories which circulated from England’s conversion, up to the English Reformation.

Many of the uses of the cross were for liturgical services, such as in the process of baptism. By marking them with the cross, priests placed the baptized under the protection of God. Thus, in the Red Book of Darley from around 1060, the signing of the cross over the baptized was to be accompanied by the words, “this sign of the cross, which we have placed on the forehead [of the baptized], you will never, wicked devil, dare to violate.” In this form, consecrated by the rite of Baptism, the cross was intended as a permanent aegis, forever marking the child as a Christian and forever protecting it from the onslaughts of the devil.

The cross, however, was not solely intended for use in church ceremonies, its protective powers could be exploited by the laity as well. Thus, Ælfric, writing earlier in the tenth century, encourages Christians to make frequent use of the sign of the cross. He prescribes it as a means of self-protection when travelling, claiming it even allowed St. Martin to divert a tree that would have otherwise fallen on him. Indeed, according to Ælfric, prayer had to be accompanied by making the sign of the cross in order to be effective, ideally with three fingers to represent the Trinity, for, “[t]hough a man wave about wonderfully with his hand, nevertheless it is not a blessing except when he make

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the sign of the cross.” In fact, the action of crossing oneself was so important that the *Blickling Homilies*, which were written anonymously during the tenth century, instruct Christians to do so seven times each day.\(^{42}\)

One story from Ælfric in particular bears mentioning, since it speaks to the power of the cross even without accompanying, underlying faith. This separation of the power of the symbol from the Christian religion in his account is instructive, since later critics would argue that it was having faith in Jesus that lent efficacy to the symbol, not the sign itself. In this case, however, it was a Jewish traveler in Greece who made use of the cross. Finding himself alone with night coming on, the Jew took shelter in a temple of Apollo, and was frightened enough that he took refuge in whatever manner he could, including signing himself with the cross before sleep. In the middle of the night he was awakened by a meeting of demons, one of whom attempted to possess him, knowing he was unbaptized, and therefore without protection. Yet, even though the Jew was not a Christian and therefore did not possess the beliefs underpinning the cross, the sign of the cross was powerful enough that it protected him from this demonic attack, and the repulsed fiend fled in terror. Not surprisingly, the story ends with the Jew converting to Christianity, its truth having been proven to him.\(^{43}\) The shielding capabilities of the cross made it one of the crucial tools that a Christian had at his disposal to prevent harm to himself, yet it also played an important role in the arsenal to fight back directly against the forces of the Devil.


\(^{42}\) Johnson, “The *Crux Usualis* as Apotropaic Weapon,” 84.

\(^{43}\) Johnson, “The *crux usualis* as Apotropaic Weapon,” 86-87.
As mentioned, the *crux usualis* could be used as a weapon, not merely keeping both spiritual and physical enemies at bay, but even driving them away completely. This was the impulse behind its deployment in medical procedures, exorcisms, and even the blessing of food before consumption. Two of these uses are attested to by the story of a nun, from the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, which were translated into English in the ninth century. This nun, in a moment of distraction, forgets to bless lettuce from her garden before consuming it. A devil was waiting on the leaf, and this ingestion without the antecedent *crux usualis* allowed it to take possession of the poor nun. Her body and soul were only saved through exorcism, when the sign of the cross was used to drive the devil back out of her body.\(^{44}\) The cross was a crucial tool for freeing a person from possession, and would be used in exorcisms for centuries. Its purgative role in exorcisms made the cross a natural fit as a more general medical implement, healing the ill.

During the Middle Ages, English men and women did not get sick from germs; they got sick as a result of spiritual influence. Sometimes it was the influence of malignant demons or devils, such as the nun who didn’t wash her lettuce, and other times it was a trial designed by God to test a Christian’s faith, or perhaps even divine retribution for sinful acts. In any of these cases, the cross could help a person to recover, but without the influence and assistance of God they would almost surely be lost. Proselytizers had long made use of saints with similar abilities to provide proof of God’s power. Even in these early centuries of the Christian Era, Christianity had a long tradition as a religion of healing. Many religious Christians perceived themselves as following in

the footsteps of Jesus, who cured lepers, the blind, the paralyzed, the possessed, and even raised the dead. Furthermore, Jesus exhorted his followers to care for the sick, and making such works a natural outgrowth of foundational Christian charity.

This emphasis on Christian healing meant that the work of Jesus was continued by early English saints, many of whom were able to do miraculous things with the cross. Bede gives one such account, where John of Beverley was able to heal a dumb youth by having the young man stick his tongue out, then making the sign of the cross over it. As a bonus, the young man’s scalp, which had been so dermatologically damaged that no hair could grow on it, was also healed. This incident was buttressed by many stories from both inside and outside of England where men of God healed the sick and blind using the cross in a similar fashion, making it over top of the afflicted body parts. Standard remedies could also combine seemingly Pagan rituals with the sign of the cross, such as protecting oneself from “flying venom” by drawing with an oaken brand, covering it with blood, then tossing it aside and making the sign of the cross. Importantly, these kinds of activities also helped in the conversion process, by further reinforcing the superior magic of God over that of pagan deities, now largely regarded as malignant demons, who were responsible for illnesses.

These two forms of the cross, then, both crux usualis and crux exempla, had important uses in the life of English Christians from the period of conversion in the

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47 Bede, History of the English Church, 303-304.
49 Karen Louise Jolly, Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996): 128. This work also contains a number of similar charms which combine pagan elements with both the crux ususualis and crux exempla.
seventh century down through the centuries. In either form, the cross was a medicine for
the sick, a salve for the wounded, a weapon against demons, and a shield against the
incursion of spirits. It was virtually omnipresent, and held to be one of the most powerful
charms in existence. Yet the compounding and indistinct powers of the cross led some to
be uncomfortable with its use, and they sought to better explain what the cross meant,
and how it was to be used without slipping into idolatry.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, there was some discomfort about the worship
of the cross itself, a discomfort which would help to foreshadow the iconoclastic
impulses engendered against the cross during the English Reformation. Ælfric was aware
that the distinction between outward obeisance and veneration of the cross could easily
spill over into idolatry. In his homilies, Ælfric wrote, “by no means however [do we pray]
to the tree itself, but to the Almighty Lord who hung for us on the holy rood.’ This
distinction, however, is not consistent throughout Ælfric’s work, and readers could be
forgiven for misconstruing where the power came from. If the inner faith is what is most
important, then why is the sign of the cross so important to turn words into a blessing?
Why can the sign of the cross only be properly made using three fingers, if the symbol
itself is not as crucial as the underpinning system of belief?

Ælfric’s insistence on this distinction was likely derived from the Church Fathers,
who were vehement in their rejection of the pejorative “cross-worshipers,” which had
been used to refer to Christians in the early centuries C.E.. Under such disparagements,
several of the Church Fathers had drawn fine distinctions between worshipping the cross
and worshipping God, in words nearly identical to those that Ælfric wrote centuries later.

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Ambrose, speaking of Constantine’s mother, Helena, who allegedly discovered the True Cross while on pilgrimage states that “[s]he adored the King, not the wood, indeed, because this is an error of the Gentiles and a vanity of the wicked. But she adored Him who hung on the tree, whose name was inscribed in the title [King of the Jews]”.

Similar words are echoed by Jerome, who says that “The Gentiles worship idols, adore sticks and stone” yet nonetheless perceive God behind them, because “His cross is the pillar of mankind….When I say cross, I am not thinking of the wood, but of the Passion.”

Though Ælfric reiterated this distinction as during his time in the eleventh century, it can be seen that in the intervening years this partition had blurred substantially, at least among the lay population. This may have been due to the lack of sustained assault upon the faith, or the importance that writers such as Bede placed on the symbol, but there is little doubt that there was not a defined line between worshipping the cross and recognizing the cross as a representation of the ethereal deity to be worshipped. This separation had become sufficiently vague that Aldhelm, an Anglo-Saxon poet and contemporary of Bede, outright referred to himself as a “worshiper of the cross,” a

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moniker that was anathema to the Church Fathers who sought to distinguish themselves from the pagans.53

Despite this slight tension over where the power of the cross came from, by the time Ælfric and Ælfwine wrote in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the magic of the cross and its meaning were largely set. English men and women turned to the cross for succor, for physical healing, for spiritual and emotional strength, and counted on it to act as a shield and spear against the literal assaults of demons and the Devil. There was little challenge to this way of thinking, and little impetus for change. Yet the end of the eleventh and the twelfth century saw the beginnings of a revitalization of the original meaning of the cross, as Christian Europe, as a whole, began to perceive itself as being under attack from an external force for the first time since Charles Martel won the battle of Tours. This time, however, it was not a result of an army invading Europe, but a strike at Jerusalem, the very heart of Christianity. That Jerusalem was captured and held by the armies of Islam, enemies of Christ, was unpardonable, and provided Christian Europe with determination to rectify the untenable situation, whatever the cost and using all the tools at their disposal. Though the cross was already both ubiquitous and powerful, the influence of the Crusades, and the emotional response that these holy wars engendered, added more fuel to the fire of cross adoration. The enhancement of perceptions of the cross came from two main sources: first from sermons about the nature and importance of crusading, and later by the influx of relics, especially pieces of the True Cross carried home as souvenirs by those returning from the Holy Land.

53 Stevens, 27.
From the 1095 Council of Clermont, when Pope Urban II first rallied the forces of Christianity on a mission to recapture Jerusalem, sermons about the cross were the primary means of marketing the crusading cause in Western Europe. Delivered largely by Dominicans and Franciscans, sermons on the import of the Crusades were used to rally support, encourage men to enlist, mark the occasion when an army set out for Jerusalem, and to hearten men before battles and throughout the long and difficult journey. Unfortunately, though references to preaching about the Crusades are widespread, few of these sermons were recorded, or at least remain in existence. Much of what we know come from model sermons, which were distributed to clergy throughout Europe to teach them how to best promote the Crusades. Yet even in those that do remain, we can see that the importance and power of the cross was at the very center of preaching the Crusades.54

The peak time for preaching the Crusades was in the spring, using the occasions of Good Friday, Easter, and the Exaltation of the Cross to stress the importance of that symbol and the reasons for the crusade. The cross is built into the very foundations of crusading, so much so that the term used for those who embarked on the mission, *cruce signatus*, has the dual meaning of “crusader” and “one who is signed with the cross,” a conflation that was often employed by preachers.55 Contemporaries termed the decision to embark on crusade as “taking the cross,” a reference to the words of Jesus, who told his followers, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take

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55 Maier, *Crusade Propaganda*, 74.
up their cross and follow me.\textsuperscript{56} The decision to go on crusade was not lightly made, since it entailed leaving one’s home, family, and crops on an uncertain journey hundreds of miles away to the legendary, and virtually mythical, birthplace of Christ. For a farmer whose livelihood was in tending his fields, and who had likely never travelled more than a few miles from his home, such a voyage was truly an onerous trek into the unknown. Therefore, convincing such a person of the righteousness and import of his undertaking was paramount. Christians would have been heartened to hear words such as those offered by the Dominican Friar Humbert of Romans in the mid-thirteenth century, who explained that “And so such people [crusaders] are given the sign of the cross as a sign that they take up this war for the faith of the Crucified, and as a sign that they are soldiers of the Crucified carrying his sign”.\textsuperscript{57} This was no idle war between kings, but an enlistment in the army of Christ, and those who took up the burden would have the cross as their banner, sword, and shield.

Another important aspect of preaching the crusade was explaining the symbolism of the cross, and why it was such a crucial part of the soldiers’ attire, specifically to be worn on the right shoulder. Among these reasons were claims that Constantine, the original Christian soldier in popular imagination and the prototype of the English hero Oswald, wore the cross on his right side. During the Middle Ages, similarly to now, the word “right” had connotations of penitence and moral rectitude. Furthermore, by crusading, Christians could be guaranteed a spot by God’s right hand.\textsuperscript{58} Crusade preachers thus used rhetoric and linguistic double entendres to imbue the literal taking of

\textsuperscript{56} Matthew 16:24 (New Revised Standard Version)
\textsuperscript{57} Humbert of Romans, \textit{Ad peregrinos crucesignatores}, in Maier, \textit{Crusade Propaganda}, 217.
the cross with deep symbolic meaning, and also provided a new meaning of being a good Christian.

Much like undertaking the rituals, wearing the signs, and attending services which previously defined Christianity, the Crusades provided a new mode of doing good works and achieving redemption. By taking up arms against the enemies of Christianity, or even attending crusade sermons, crusaders were promised forgiveness for their sins as a reward for their contribution to the cause.59 This redefined what were considered “good works,” and helped bring the private, beneficent actions of a person under the purview and discretion of the Holy See. Thus, the Church paved the way for offering deliverance through the selling of indulgences, a practice which would become increasingly important in the coming centuries, especially since it underpinned many of the complaints leveled against the Church by Reformers. So, even if the journey ended in death, as it did for so many of crusaders, the Church guaranteed salvation to everyone who undertook the journey, “for devotion alone, not to obtain honour or money.”60 This tied a person’s willingness to both figuratively and, perhaps more importantly, literally bear the cross to the redemption of his soul.

Beyond these emblematic reasons, those who wore the cross could be expected to receive tangible, physical benefits. According to the *Summa Praedicantium*, written by the Dominican preacher John of Bromyard (d. 1352), the powers of the cross are useful in battle for Christians, since the power that it has to drive away demons or the Devil is also

efficacious for repelling infidels. Additionally, Bromyard preached that it would provide protection against poison, wild animals, and even the weather. Moreover, if Christians were to paint it on walls of buildings it would safeguard the building from harm, and even prevent people and animals from urinating on it. The wide variety of powers attributed to the cross made it appear as if there was very little that it was unable to do for the bearer. As in prior years, this went beyond protective properties: the cross could also be wielded as a weapon.

Though few sermons are as explicit as those given by John of Bromyard, many preachers carried the theme of the cross as a fighting instrument. Eudes of Châteauroux, the thirteenth century preacher and cardinal bishop of Tusculum claimed that, “The cross of Christ is the sword with which Christ fought against the devil....This sword is holy, because everything that is blessed is blessed with the cross, and it blesses and purges those who take it.” In another case, James of Vitry, who accompanied the Fifth Crusade and preceded Eudes of Châteauroux in his role at Tusculum, played on themes of the cross as both a banner, means of salvation, and a weapon, writing that, “Those who take the sign of the cross are the standard-bearers of the highest king and the key-bearers of his house. The cross is the key that opens the gates of paradise...For some the cross is a key, for others a mace: It is placed for the fall and the resurrection of many.”

Preachers thus added their voices to lend credence to what Europeans already commonly believed to be powers of the cross, and these sermons were preached frequently, to the point that

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62 Eudes of Chateauroux, *Sermo de invitatione ad crucem*, in Maier, *Crusade Propaganda*, 149.

English men and women would likely have heard variations on the theme several times per year, and those who actually went crusading even more frequently. Crusaders certainly would have understood that by not wearing their cross, they would have foregone these benefits, and would have literally been handicapping themselves, and the success or failure of the Crusades could hinge on the strength of their belief. Furthermore, there was no clear distinction between the apotropaic, physical, and spiritual uses of the cross. The variety and regularity with which preachers espoused these themes encouraged Englishmen to continue their magical thinking about the cross, since it was at the core of Christianity, and provided everything they needed for both safety in this world and salvation in the next.

As the Crusades progressed, there came another reason to adore and worship the cross as a result of those who made the journey to the Holy Land found that they were indeed protected by their faith. As crusaders returned from their forays into Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, they often brought back plunder and souvenirs, often in the form of religious artifacts. This was especially true after the Fourth Crusade, when the sacking of Constantinople in 1204 afforded many crusaders the opportunity to return home with relics, either alongside or in lieu of wealth or valuables. This included a large variety of treasures from the life of Christ and his followers, including portions “of the thorns of the crown of the Lord, of the purple vestment of Jesus Christ, of the swaddling clothes of the Savior, of the linen with which he girded himself at the Supper, of the girdle of the Virgin, [and] of the head of St. Paul and St. James the Younger.”

of possessing tangible pieces out of sacred legend was compelling, and portions of the True Cross were one of the most common relics which made the journey back west.

Crusaders returned home with a huge number of pieces of the True Cross, which ranged in size from splinters to nearly entire crossbeams, and their popularity resulted in a preponderance of pilgrimage sites throughout Europe. In England, there was no shortage of True Cross relics. At the very least, alleged pieces could be found at St John’s in Chester, the Cistercian abbey in Vale Royal, Acton Church in Cheshire, Bromholm Priory, Salisbury Cathedral, Bar Convent in York, as well as Exeter.Later Reformers would highlight the absurdity of the plethora of pieces of the True Cross which existed at that time, such as John Calvin who commented in his work *A Treatise on Relics*, that, “[T]here is not a church, from a cathedral to the most miserable abbey or parish church, that does not contain a piece,” before continuing, “if we were to collect all these pieces of the true cross exhibited in various parts, they would form a whole ship's cargo. The Gospel testifies that the cross could be borne by one single individual; how glaring, then, is the audacity now to pretend to display more relics of wood than three hundred men could carry!”

People recognized the difficulty in explaining this situation, and found a way to reconcile it with reality. According to Calvin, in a loaves-and-fishes style miracle, Church officials claimed that the True Cross never diminished in size, no matter how

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many pieces were taken from it. This explanation would have allowed literally every church to boast a portion of the True Cross, and each of them would have had as much legitimacy and power as the rest. Though this explanation may strike modern readers as insufficient, there was an established precedent for the cross to change size, as it did for Solomon in the rendering found in *The Golden Legend*, which was the most standard mythology of the time. Whether people actually believed this justification, or it was merely a convenient way to explain away the surfeit of True Cross relics, is impossible to say. It does show, however, that Christians were not blind to the overabundance of the True Cross, and that many writers at the time commented on it speaks to the significance that the relic had for both Crusaders and the general population.

The incredible flooding of relics into England led to another expansion of the cult of cross worship, inspired by the proliferation of reliquaries, made to hold these sacred objects. Though the pieces of the True Cross themselves were merely wood, the standard at the time was to encase important religious articles in vessels worthy of holding them, which invariably meant extremely ornate containers. Often covered in gold leaf, or richly carved and inlaid with gold and silver and decorated with jewels, often referred to as *crux gemmata*, reliquaries for the True Cross were simultaneously artwork and protective coverings for the valuable spiritual objects. The physical beauty and wealth of the container was meant to reflect the religious and spiritual wealth of the object inside, which for pieces of the True Cross was boundless.67

Unfortunately, there are no extant examples of richly decorated cross reliquaries from England, likely a result of the sixteenth century iconoclasm. Yet imagery from *The Dream of the Rood*, “That beacon was entirely/cased in gold; beautiful gems stood/at the corners of the earth, likewise there were five/upon the cross-beam,” indicates that such crosses certainly existed even before the crusading period, when the accumulation of relics led to an explosion in the number of reliquaries.⁶⁸ Oftentimes, reliquaries of the True Cross would be designed to be removed from the church so that they could be carried in processions, a natural extension of the tradition of processional crosses.

Processions were one of the key rituals and communal religious activities of Medieval Christianity. Members of the clergy followed strict liturgical requirements during processions, leading congregants to circumambulate the church or parish while singing hymns or chanting, culminating inside the church with the saying of Mass. These rituals were common throughout the year on Sundays and Saints days, and at theologically important times, such as Advent or Lent, would occur nearly daily. Such activities were by no means a Christian invention, and though they were subsumed by Christianity in the early Christian centuries, many retained undeniable traces of Pagan religion. One especially obvious example of these vestiges occurred on Rogantide in late April, where the “beating of the bounds” helped mark out the boundaries of the town, while also driving away evil spirits and bringing fertility to the field for the coming growing season.⁶⁹ In every case, these cavalcades were led by a processional cross, a large and richly decorated cross or crucifix, hoisted high on a pole for all to see.⁷⁰

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⁶⁸ *Dream of the Rood*, lines 6-9.
⁷⁰ Colum Hourihane, *The Processional Cross in Late Medieval England: the ‘Dallye Cross’* (London: The Society of Antiquaries of London, 2005), 1-14. In cases where a crucifix was used, the figure of Jesus
Processional crosses similar to those seen in the Middle Ages likely existed from the ninth and tenth centuries, though the earliest ones still existent are from the twelfth century, and include examples such as the Cross of Cong and the Cloisters Cross (Fig. 2, 3). These objects were both devotional pieces and artworks, worked from metal and often gilded or bejeweled, or intricately carved from expensive material such as ivory, made to be both beautiful and awe-inspiring. Whether by design or happenstance, they often served a variety of purposes: the Cross of Cong was crafted to be attached to a staff or pole for use in processions, yet also functioned as a reliquary, while the Cloisters Cross has a bottom broken from being fastened to multiple bases, likely from having served as both a processional and altar cross. These crosses were visually engaging, and prominent features of the liturgical year. The inclusion of the cross at the head of processions, occurring in all weather and many times throughout the year, reinforced the centrality of the cross to Christianity.

Taking into account all the different forms that the cross took, physical or symbolic, relic of the True Cross or representational, legendary or tangible, later generations can get a sense of how ubiquitous and important it was for the English people. Not only was it an unavoidable sight in life, visible everywhere from churches to manors to the very landscape, but it was a crucial part of spiritual life, built into the prayers, meditations, and religious services that gave meaning to existence. Since 

would always face in the same direction as congregants, leading the way, much as he did during the original processional to Golgatha, John 19:16-18.

Medieval Christianity focused on rituals such as processions, and these rituals so often focused on the image of the cross, it is unsurprising that for many, there was no Christianity without the cross. Even at its very foundation, England had Christianity and the cross built in through the legendary figure of Oswald, and Christians in England were told stories of the healing and protective capabilities of the cross, whether in physical form or as a motion as the sign of the cross. These legends did not disappear either, since many of the same stories and examples from these early times were known and cited
centuries later. When William Caxton translated the French *Le Doctrinal de Sapience* and published it in 1489, we see familiar tales: a nun who becomes possessed after forgetting to bless her lettuce with the sign of the cross, a Jew who avoids possession by marking himself with the sign of the cross. There are also additional stories which stress the power of the cross, such as that of the virgin St. Justine, who drives away the devils that Cyprian sends to tempt her using the sign of the cross, and thus protects her virginity. This certainly attests to the fact that the mythology of the cross did not diminish in the intervening centuries. In fact, growing legends and the influence of the crusades added to the potency of the cross, leading Christians to think about it in new, and increasingly important ways. There was little to challenge the primacy of the cross among the rituals and symbols of Christian magic during this period, and the first outspoken critics, the
Lollards, would make little headway among the general population. Nonetheless, in order to understand the iconoclastic impulses that surged in the middle of the sixteenth century, it is crucial to understand how the inchoate reformation espoused by the Lollards challenged and influenced Christian reflections on the cross.
Chapter 2 – Lollard Contributions to Cross Debates

Though it was influenced by movements on the continent, the English Reformation, as its name would suggest, was fundamentally English in nature, with roots in national religious discussion that had been ongoing for well over a century. Looming large among these debates was the question of the cross, and what place, if any, it should have in churches and Christian life. John Wycliffe and the Lollards, for a variety of reasons, fundamentally challenged the centrality of the cross in worship, prayer, processions, and church architecture. Despite the fact that the Lollard movement was hampered by stalwart defenders within the Church, their criticisms survived in general consciousness, and even thrived in pockets throughout the country. The attacks that the Lollards levelled against the church and the reforms that they proposed for Christianity were rekindled during the kingship first of Henry VIII, then far more dramatically under his son, Edward VI. In order to understand the zealous iconoclasm of the latter’s reign, it is necessary to know how the Lollards attempted to reform Christianity, where they succeeded, and where they failed.

In the fourteenth century, as in the seventh, England was overwhelmingly agrarian, literacy rates were securely in the single digits, Christianity mingled extensively with paganism, and the average life expectancy was approximately in the mid-30s for those who survived infancy. Yet despite these outward appearances, the England of

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John Wycliffe was not the same as the England of Bede, and the church had similarly evolved. The intervening years produced numerous secular and social developments that came to shape the religious life of the coming centuries.

For one, the church in fourteenth century England had been drawn much more closely into relations with Rome and the ecclesiastical structure. The stabilization and centralization of England had made a more coherent organization possible, and the desire for adherence had turned Christianity into more than simply a religion, but also a defining component of what it was to be English. A good king meant a Christian king, and, as a result, a good subject must also be Christian. While linking England more closely with Rome had provided the church with leadership and ecclesiastical structure, it also created tension and debates over sovereignty between the papacy and English kings. In many ways, the Holy See was the victor in these power struggles, and the throne ended up ceding a great deal of secular power to the religious institution. Of particular note is the Investiture Controversy of the early thirteenth century, when King John surrendered a great deal of royal authority under duress both at home and abroad.

The Investiture Controversy began from a dispute over the appointment of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. When John refused to acknowledge Roman authority on matters of ecclesiastical appointment, the entire country of England was placed under interdict from 1208 to 1214. The troubles were compounded when Pope Innocent III excommunicated King John eighteen months later, in November of 1209. As a result, for six years, aside from baptism and deathbed confessions, no sacraments were openly administered by English clergy, and King John was held to be in opposition to the

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England was decidedly Christian, despite the influence of paganism, see Ronald Hutton, “How Pagan were Medieval English Peasants?” *Folklore* 122, no. 3 (December 2011): 235-249.
authority and will of God. England suffered under this affliction for four years, until under threat of internal revolt, invasion from France, and potential deposition by Innocent III, John relented, suffering a total and humiliating defeat. Not only did the pope’s chosen man become archbishop, but Innocent also forced John to return the monies and lands which he had seized from churches and bishops over the previous years. Furthermore, and most importantly, John submitted England and Ireland to the papacy; from then on English kings ruled a papal fiefdom at the discretion of Rome.73

While earlier kings had admitted the Pope’s supremacy in the spiritual realm, John differed in that he relinquished secular power as well.74 Afterwards, as mere caretakers of papal lands, English kings were subject to the will and whims of the Holy See. As a papal state, the laws of England required the pope’s approval, and legal cases for all literate males could be appealed in ecclesiastical courts, making the pope the ultimate legal authority in England.75 This system existed until the 1532 Statute in Restraint of Appeals reclaimed this power for Henry VIII, but he was not the first king to chafe at the yoke.

Nor was the effect simply in the realm of legal and temporal supremacy, since the situation also meant that the wealth of England was subject to papal authority. The standard tithes, indulgences, benefices, and simony all drew wealth from England and sent it to Rome, and the Pope could demand that English monies be used to build or

improve cathedrals. These conditions helped reshape the ecclesiastical landscape of Early Modern England, and defined the debates over Reformation of the church throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth century. While the average, illiterate Englishman did not see, or care about, the power dynamics at play behind the control of church funds, there were societal changes in the late Medieval Period which were much more pertinent to their existences and profoundly impacted their religious lives.

The greatest social upheaval during the Middle Ages came from the impact of the Black Death, and it had reverberations through every aspect of life. Beginning in 1348, the plague ravaged England, and though the spread was uneven and not all regions were affected at the same time, roughly one-third of the population succumbed to the disease. Obviously, a demographic upheaval on this scale had profound impacts on society, to a degree that is difficult to overstate. Both England’s social structure and the populace’s belief in, and perspective on, the benign and forgiving God espoused by Christianity were shaken. Unflinching belief in salvation and goodness was especially questioned as Christian leaders were not spared from the plague. Clergy may, in fact, have perished in greater numbers as they exposed themselves to the plague while performing sacraments and providing comfort to the ill and their families. Many of the churchmen who survived the plague did so only by abandoning their posts and fleeing to unaffected areas, which did not instill confidence or religiosity in surviving congregants.

Beyond the spiritual impact of observing this winnowing of the church, there was a notable temporal effect, as the laity of England did not receive the usual benefits from the church. As laity and clergy perished, individual parishes were combined or eliminated, undermining and interrupting the social cohesion which the church provided
in normal times. Sacraments and funerary rites were perfunctory, if given at all, and holy
days and festivals went unobserved. In some areas, parish churches saw more turnover in
clergy than at any previous time in history from the combination of death and flight.
Prayers, flagellation, and processions did not halt or slow the advance of the plague, and
the pious died alongside the vulgar. The church’s ecclesiastic structure, espoused
morality, sacramental comfort, and even the chronological organization that they
provided to peoples’ years and lives were all largely dismantled. Furthermore, since the
Church was unable to protect its own flock, or even provide support and relief during the
crisis, the eternal rewards and deliverance that they promised were all increasingly
questioned.

As social and religious structures collapsed, survivors of the plague were left
reeling, and grasping to understand the world which they inherited. This confusion and
discord left a fertile ground for the ideas of John Wycliffe (c.1327–1384), who argued for
a Christianity which did not rely so heavily on organized church structures. Having lived
through the Black Death and been ordained a deacon in the early 1350s, Wycliffe was a
product of his time. By the 1370s, Wycliffe’s work at Oxford earned him a reputation for
being reformationally minded, notably for encouraging apostolic poverty above material
gain. Through his prolific, albeit academic and abstruse, writings, Wycliffe sparked the
movement which, over the coming century, his followers developed and evolved into
what became known as Lollardy.

76 William J. Dohar, The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership: the Diocese of Hereford in the Fourteenth
77 Michael Wilks, “John Wyclif, Reformer, c.1327-1384” in Wyclif: Political Ideas and Practice, sel. by
78 For the sake of this work, I will use the designation “Lollard,” though this term is widely contested. In
recent decades, scholars have debated whether there was a coherent, influential, capital L “Lollard”
movement of which Wycliffe is the father. Many scholars point to the preponderance of numerous heretical
Lollard heresy in England was by no means universally accepted or evenly spread, and the only way to measure its significance is through cases brought against heretics. Thus, while areas in Kent, Bristol, and London seem to have been particularly infected, whether this is factually accurate or due to specific adversity or the survival of documents is nearly impossible to say. The same is true of which segments of society were most receptive to Lollard thought, and while the records seem to indicate a strong contingent among middle-class tradesmen, this may reflect a bias on the part of who church authorities opted to prosecute. It is likely that the church may have neglected to pursue the least important members of society, and opted not to incur the ire, and strong

sect, only one of which were Wycliffites, which lack a consistency in the details of their beliefs. Some of these sects, rather than hoping to reform Christianity, were strongly anti-religious and mocked piety in general, which contributed to the creation of a system of suspicion which hindered Lollardy. Authorities tended to lump all fringe religious movements together under the single term, and thus scholars argue that the movement can only be called “lollardy” nebulously at best, and inaccurately and misleadingly at worst. Still other, such as Richard Rex, have attempted to dismiss the Lollards completely as neither numerically nor culturally important, because “Catholicism proved itself more than adequate to the spiritual needs” of the medieval English believer, yet this view remains the exception. Despite the fact that scholars cannot agree on the coherence of Lollardy or whether there was a single point of origin, i.e. Wycliffe and Oxford, let alone the pedantic issue of capitalization, there is wide agreement that there was a substantial segment of English society which trended towards unorthodox Christian thought. While early 16th century heretics may not have identified themselves as Lollards, know the name of Wycliffe, or possessed any Wycliffite writings, this by no means indicates that they were isolated from the ideas of the original generation of Lollards; especially since opposing groups partially, if not primarily, define themselves through interactions with their opponents. The debates surrounding the identification of a distinct “Lollard” movement, as well as the further question of the possibility or likelihood of widespread dissemination of Wycliffe’s ideas from the academy to the population, are significant, but an exploration of those areas of inquiry are beyond the scope of this study. For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that there was an element of iconoclasm within the original Lollard movement directly applicable to the image of the cross, that these ideas were embraced by the wider population, and they remained existent into the time of the Reformation. See Margaret Aston, “Were the Lollards a Sect?” in The Medieval Church: Universities, Heresy, and the Religious Life: Essays in Honour of Gordon Leff, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 11 (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1999), 163–91; Shannon McSheffrey, “Heresy, Orthodoxy and English Vernacular Religion 1480–1525,” Past & Present 186, no. 1, (February 2005): 47–80; J. Patrick Hornbeck II, What is a Lollard?: Dissent and Belief in Late Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); John A.F. Thomson, “Orthodox Religion and the Origins of Lollardy,” History 74, no. 240 (1989): 39-55; Richard Rex, The Lollards (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Robert Swanson, “Lollardy”, “Orthodoxy”, and "Resistance" in Pre-Reformation England, "Theological Journal / Usuteaduslik Ajakiri 64, no. 1 (2013): 12-26, and A.E. Larsen, “Are all Lollards Lollards?” Lollards and their Influence in Late Medieval England, edited by Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 66–72.
legal defense, of the important and wealthy. Undeniably, however, Lollard ideas were widely distributed, and many Englishmen were receptive to them.\textsuperscript{79}

Lollardy stressed an individual piety and eliminated the need for complex sacraments, processions, and liturgy; furthermore, they condemned the clergy for their active participation in perpetuating superstitions with no basis in the Bible.\textsuperscript{80} Perhaps most importantly, Lollards pushed for individual interpretation of the scripture and a focus on local charity and benevolence. Among other things, this encouraged the translation of the Bible, the use of the English language for services and Biblical tracts, and a condemnation of pilgrimages, rich decoration, and images, including the cross.

The rejection of the image of the cross was not straightforward, nor was it a central tenet of Lollardy. Rather, it was largely used as an indicator of heretical beliefs: Lollards focused more on other reforms, but opponents and inquisitors often used questions about images and the cross as a means of positively identifying Lollards.\textsuperscript{81} As a result, perspectives on the cross became more important to opponents of Lollards than it was to the movement itself, and thus, in the inquisition records, became a central tenet of the movement. Not only was it useful as a shortcut for identifying Lollards, but the cross and related symbolism had become increasingly important from a doctrinal perspective over the previous centuries, adding to its already potent magical associations. The result was that the Lollard rejection of it was taken more seriously than it would have been in

\textsuperscript{79} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 121-125.
earlier times. There had been significant development in thoughts towards the cross from both mythological and theological interpretations over the previous century.

The mythology surrounding the cross and its significance was codified in the 13th century work of Jacobus de Voragine. His *Legenda aurea* [Golden Legend], was a compendium of stories compiled during the 1260s which provided readers with anecdotes highlighting the significance of saints, feast days, and the religious ceremonies which marked people’s lives. Among these tales was one about the finding of the True Cross; a matter of increasing importance as relics flowed into England from the Crusades. In telling the story of the True Cross, Jacobus relates how Adam’s son, Seth, took a branch from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and planted it over Adam’s grave, with the promise that “when the branch bore fruit, his father would be made whole.” Later, Solomon had the tree cut down to build his house. Jacobus tells us that there are multiple versions of the story, where either Solomon successfully incorporated the tree into his forest house, or alternatively the wood would not remain the same size and he then repurposed it to serve as a bridge. In either case, the enigmatic queen of Sheba saw the tree during her visit to Solomon, and had a vision that “a certain man was to hang upon that wood, and that by this man’s death the kingdom of the Jews would be destroyed.” In response to hearing this, Solomon had the wood buried deep in the earth so that it would not be discovered, and in the ensuing years a pond welled up on the spot. At the

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time of the Passion, the wood floated to the top, the Jews found it and fashioned it into the cross used to crucify Jesus.  

Jacobus thus draws a direct line from Adam, the first man, to Jesus, and thereby amplifies the importance of the physical cross. No more was the True Cross a mere piece of wood imbued with meaning solely through the crucifixion. The branch had once held the forbidden apple which Eve plucked and shared with Adam at the behest of the Devil, bringing sin into the world. This act caused the downfall of mankind, resulting in ejection from the utopian Garden of Eden and the introduction of death into the human experience. By later serving as the gibbet for the Son of God, the tree bore a new “fruit,” and thus became the means by which the prophecies were fulfilled and sin conquered. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, mankind was again able to achieve salvation and eternal life. The same piece of wood was therefore responsible for both Original Sin and death, and the conquest of sin and capacity for eternal life. Theologically, this completed the cycle and Adam, as the progenitor and representative of all mankind, was again “made whole.”

Jacobus’s work was incredibly influential, and was more widely used than any other collection of religious tales. Thousands of manuscripts of *Golden Legend* survive,  

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85 The notion that the Jews found the piece of wood and fashioned the cross for Jesus’s crucifixion is an example of the rampant anti-semitism which plagued England at the time, and would result in the 1290 expulsion of Jews under Edward I. Historically speaking, the Romans were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Theologically, however, this reinforced the responsibility of the Jewish people for this deicide, and the fulfillment of the prophecy. For a discussion of the expulsion of the Jews under Edward I see Ira Katznelson, "‘To Give Counsel and to Consent’: Why the King (Edward I) Expelled His Jews (in 1290)," in *Preferences and Situations: Points of Intersection Between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism*, edited by Ira Katznelson and Barry R. Weingast (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005): 88-126 and Barnett D. Ovrut, “Edward I and the Expulsion of the Jews,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 67, no.4 (April 1977): 224-235. For depictions and of Jews in Christian thought, see Kristine T. Utterback and Merrall Llewelyn Price, editors, *Jews in Medieval Christendom: “Slay Them Not”* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) and Peter Landesman, *Anti-Judaism on the Way from Judaism to Christianity* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).
in both Latin and vernacular languages. Unsurprisingly, the advent of printing only increased its popularity, and in the thirty years between 1470 and 1500, scholars have identified over a hundred and fifty separate printings, again in both Latin and the vernaculars. It was printed in English at least nine times in London and Westminster between 1480 and 1530. Originally intended as a sourcebook for preachers, these stories were often simplified and preached throughout the year, on the appropriate days. At the time it was written, Voragine’s version of the story of the True Cross would have had special significance, due to the influx of relics resulting from the Crusades over the previous centuries. Furthermore, the importance of the wood itself would have dovetailed nicely with the theology of Thomas Aquinas, who, contradicting the writings of earlier theologians, established that the cross should be worshiped with latria, or that form of worship reserved for God alone.

Writing in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, the “Angelic Doctor,” expanded on the work of several contemporaries and influentially argued that the cross was, in essence, on par with God in terms of the reverence that Christians should have for it. The Church Fathers had unequivocally established that the Cross was a symbol for God, and should therefore be admired as a tool and means of focusing one’s mind on the Almighty, but not more. In his summa theologica, Thomas Aquinas took the seemingly opposite view from Ambrose and Jerome, who had distinguished between the wood of the cross and the passion of Christ, which the cross represented.

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87 Thomas Aquinas (c.1225-1274) was a Dominican Friar, Catholic priest, and perhaps the most influential Christian theologian of the Middle Ages. For an introduction to Aquinas, see Denys Turner, Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait (Yale University Press, 2013) and for a more in-depth analysis of his thought, see Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, Thomas Aquinas: Faith, Reason, and Following Christ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
If, therefore, we speak of the cross itself on which Christ was crucified, it is
to be venerated by us in both ways---namely, in one way in so far as it
represents to us the figure of Christ extended thereon; in the other way, from
its contact with the limbs of Christ, and from its being saturated with His
blood. Wherefore in each way it is worshiped with the same adoration as
Christ, viz. the adoration of "latria." And for this reason also we speak to
the cross and pray to it, as to the Crucified Himself. But if we speak of the
effigy of Christ's cross in any other material whatever - for instance, in stone
or wood, silver or gold - thus we venerate the cross merely as Christ's image,
which we worship with the adoration of "latria, 88

The word latria was important for Aquinas, and he used it to distinguish from the other
kind of worship, dulia. Aquinas derived his understanding of the distinction between
latria and dulia from the work of another influential church father: Augustine of Hippo.
According to Augustine, latria was that worship which was due to God alone, while dulia
was a lower form of reverence which could be applied to lesser beings and creatures,
even other people. Aquinas was careful, therefore, to assure his readers that the cross was
not merely deserving of dulia, but the highest form of worship intended for God alone.
Additionally, for the sake of lucidity, he drew a distinction between the True Cross and
the representation of the cross. For Aquinas, the former was holy and deserving of latria
because it had been in contact with Jesus’s body and his blood, and that alone was
enough to establish its privileged place. In addition, Aquinas argued that the form of the
cross represented the Son of God, which was also enough reason to worship it with latria.
Thus, while the wrought crosses displayed in churches were only “effigies” of the True
Cross, they still represented Jesus, making them equally deserving of latria.

Aquinas based this conclusion on the work of Augustine. On the nature of idols,
Augustine asked, “Does anyone worship or pray with his eyes fixed on the image,

without being persuaded that the image is hearing his petition and without hoping that it will give him what he wants? Probably not.”

While it may seem contradictory at first glance, Aquinas actually drew a very fine distinction, based upon his definition of reverence, whether it was *dulia* or *latria*. Aquinas states that a man cannot venerate an irrational creature, and any physical depiction is inherently irrational since it is a dead thing, deserving of neither form of worship. In this case, then, all the reverence one could have for the cross or crucifix is directed at the thing it represents, which is, of course, Christ. Since Jesus was God, any reverence for the cross must be in the form of *latria*, otherwise it would be idolatrous. By Aquinas’s logic, not only are images of Christ and the cross acceptable, but they should be held in the highest possible esteem.

By the fourteenth century, de Voragine’s version of the finding of the True Cross shaped how most of the population understood worshipping the cross, and Aquinas’s theology informed church doctrine and practice. This entrenched belief in the centrality of the cross the Christianity formed the bulwark for the opposition that Wycliffe faced when he wrote. How Wycliffe felt about the worship of the cross can be easily gleaned from his *Apology for Lollard Doctrines*. In this work, he expressly forbids the worshipping of images of saints, since worship is to be reserved for “þe Trinite a lone.”

His condemnation does not stop there, since he extends it to all “þingis formid of

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91 For the purposes of this paper, quotations in Middle and Early Modern English will be rendered as faithfully as possible to the original source, with the exception of the latin esh (ʃ). My reasons for doing so are threefold. First, it will prevent errors of transcription or translation from being insinuated into the text. Second, I believe that the modern academic readers will largely be capable of parsing out the meaning without my own interjection, and this will allow the voices of historical figures to speak for themselves. Finally, in chapter three, I have included poems and ballads, which are most evocative, and simply work better, in the original. See *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), sections 13.7, 11.61 and 11.142-143.
mannis craft”. He included the altars with their plates and candles, the carved saints, the extravagantly decorated churches, resplendent with jewels and intricate tapestries and, of course, crosses and crucifixes. Indeed, one can hardly help but think of the cross when Wycliffe discusses how “if þe carpenter hew doun þe wode a tre, and graue it diligently…mak a dwelling for it, setting it in a wal, festining it wiþ irne that it fal not, loking to it, witing [knowing] þat it may not help it silf, it is an imyge.”\textsuperscript{92} No doubt fifteenth and sixteenth century readers immediately pictured the roods and crosses hanging prominently above church altars or altar screens, directly in their sight line during services. This proscription against all images, and anything made by the hands of man is suitably vague that it could be applied to almost anything, which is in line with the general thrust of the Lollard arguments that pictures, images, and statues are not the important aspects of Christianity, and they should not be the focus of Christian attention.

A classic example of Lollard thought can be taken from the testimony of William Thorpe in his showdown with Archbishop Arundel in 1407. While little is known about Thorpe, his foil in these debates, Thomas Arundel, was a powerful and well-known figure, both politically and within the church. Arundel was Archbishop of Canterbury first in 1397, again from 1399 until his death in 1414, and was one of the most vehement opponents of the Lollards.\textsuperscript{93} Arundel was opposed to the Lollards even before becoming

\textsuperscript{92} John Wycliffe, \textit{An Apology for Lollard Doctrines} (London: The Camden Society, 1842), 85-86.

\textsuperscript{93} William Thorpe’s identity outside of this work has been hard to pin down, but it seems likely that he was a real person. Though Arundel’s records are silent about this particular debate, Thorpe mentions an encounter with Robert Braybrooke, Bishop of London, which finds support in \textit{John Lydford’s Book}, ed. D. M. Owen (Devon and Cornwall Record Society ns xix, 1974). Additionally, a man named William Thorpe was vicar in the northern parts of England, where Arundel claims that the author had “pis twenti wyntir and more trueelid aboute busili...sowynge aboute fals doctrine.” See Anne Hudson, editor. \textit{Two Wycliffite Texts: The Sermon of William Taylor, 1406; The Testimony of William Thorpe, 1407}. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), xlvii and 29; Arundel was heavily involved in politics during the 1390s, and the crisis between Richard II and the Lords Appellant. He was forced to flee England in 1397 under threat from Richard II. See Michael Wilks, “Thomas Arundel of York: the Appellant Archbishop,” in \textit{Wyclif: Political
Archbishop, and his elevation gave him the power to suppress movement in a direct and substantial way. If Thorpe’s account is to be believed, it was a dangerous encounter indeed, since several years earlier in 1401, Arundel had introduced the death penalty for heretics with his *De Heretico Comburendo*. **94**

Despite the danger of being burned as a heretic, when he was questioned by Archbishop Arundel in 1407, Thorpe did not waver in his expression of how he and other Lollards felt about images: “But þe keruynge, þe ʒetynge [things cast of metal], neiþer þe peyntyngne of ymagerie wiþ mannus hond, al be it...ordeyned of hem to be a kalender to lewde men þat neiþer kunnen, ne wolen be leerned to knowe God bi his word...ʒit þis ymagerie owiþ not to be worschipid in þis foorme.” If Thorpe’s position was classic Lollard, Arundel’s reply was just as stalwartly orthodox when he argued, “But a crucifix owiþ to be worschipid for þe passioun of Crist þat is peyntid þereinne, and is brouʒt þereþoruʒ into manus mynde...siþ in ymagis maad wiþ mannes hond we moun rede and knowe manye dyuerse doingis of God and hise seintis, schulen we not worschipen her ymagis?” Undeterred, though he did not address specifically the case of the cross, Thorpe merely pointed to the scripture, stating that the worship of images is forbidden throughout the Bible, by Moses, David, Baruch and in the books of Wisdom. **95**

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**94** While there is little doubt that Arundel was interested in suppressing Lollards for religious reasons, there is a case to be made that King Henry IV issued *De Heretico Comburendo* to suppress divisions within the realm, and reestablish order after the tumultuous 1390s, the deposition of Richard II, and his recent assent to the throne. The text makes the claim that “ perverse people of a certain new sect...do wickedly instruct and inform people, and as such they may excite and stir them to sedition and insurrection, and make great strife and division among the people.” Danny Pickering, *The Statutes at Large from the Fifteenth Year of King Edward III to the Thirteenth Year of King Hen. IV*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Joseph Bentham, 1762), 415.

Tellingly, the books that Thorpe cites are all Old Testament works, concerning the nature of idols. He does not debate the importance of the cross as established by the New Testament or subsequent theological developments, since there was no need. The Old Testament, as the foundation of Christianity, expressly forbids worshipping images, and, as Wycliffe had argued, “every book of both the Old and New Testaments is of equal authority, insofar as we believe that this comes from the Holy Spirit.” For Thorpe and other Lollards, the image in question wasn’t important, whether it was a cross or a painting or a statue. The subtle reasoning and theology of Aquinas and the resultant position of the church which defended worshipping of the crucifix with latria, no matter how convincing, did not provide justification for the outright rejection of scripture.

Though Thorpe is the narrator of this scene, making his account of the confrontation somewhat suspect, what he recounts is a classic debate that raged throughout the fifteenth century, and spilled over into the Reformation. For Thorpe, the fact that the Old Testament expressly forbids the worship of images is argument enough, without a reliance on doctrine, tradition, or the stance of the Church. Arundel, looking to the traditional arguments that images cause Christians to reflect upon and contemplate the sacrifice of Jesus and that they act as books for the illiterate, represents the traditional outlook of the Church. That Thorpe does not directly respond to Arundel’s point about the crucifix is largely irrelevant: there is no asterisk in the Bible saying what images or under what circumstances image worship is allowed, and, therefore, Thorpe holds it to be a blanket condemnation. Given the position that Thorpe holds, it is likely no

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97 This specific encounter apparently had no ill-effects for Thorpe, who obviously survived to publish his account, but his ultimate fate is unknown.
coincidence that Arundel’s 1407 (issued in 1409) Constitutions made explicit what specific teachings would result in one being branded a heretic, and there can be no doubt that these prohibitions were aimed at curtailing the work of the Lollards. Among other charges, such as preaching without a license, Arundel’s Constitutions establish in no uncertain terms that “the Crosse and Image of the crucifix... are to bee worshipped with procession, bowying of knees, offryng of francke incense, kissyngs, oblations, lightyng of candels, and pilgrimages, and withall other kynd of ceremonies and maners.”

A large part of the Lollard objection to crosses and crucifixes was in their making. Generally, Lollard doctrine objected to richness in all things, since it does no good decorating objects and churches while men and women suffer from want. Instead of worshipping things, money was to be given to the poor, since “pe sowle of pe trewe man is pe temple of Crist.... Wat profit is it pe wallis to schine wiþ precious stonis, and Crist to dice in pe pore man for hunger.” This is certainly the idea that Margaery Baxter was referring to in 1429 when she reproached her neighbor for woshipping the work of “leude wrightes, [who] of stocks hew & forme such crosses and images,” and physically spread her arms wide and declared “this is the true crosse of Christ, and thys crosse thou oughtest and mayest euery day beholde and worship in thine own house and therefore it is but vain to run to the church to worship dead crosses & images.” This view was not strictly heretical, however, so that even in the orthodox work of Dives and Pauper it makes an appearance. When the skeptical Dives inquires how the questionable ceremony

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99 Wycliffe, Apology, 49.
100 Foxe, Actes and Monuments [1570], 807-808, see also Norman P. Tanner, Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Norwich (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), 41-51.
of creeping to the cross differed from idolatry, the patient Pauper explained that, “þe croos” has many meanings, and that in addition to being the token of Jesus, “þe shap of man is a croos, and as he heng vpon þe croos he was a verey croos.” While this explanation may have placated many Christians, the issue of creeping to the cross, and what it meant, would become a great point of contention in the mid-sixteenth century.

For the Lollards, however, the fact that man is shaped like a cross could not justify idolatry, and was, in fact, one of the arguments against the symbol of the cross. The money that went into fashioning these elaborate objects, and the time spent revering them, aside from the debate over whether to worship was “to” or merely “before” the image, detracted from the intended meaning of the Bible. No matter what their purpose, they were merely decorations in the church, and the message of the gospels and the written word is clear: poverty and charity are to be valued over the accumulation of wealth. Wycliffe highlights this directly: “But now wan þe Lord haþ halowid þe pouert of his hows, bere we þe cros, and kownt we gold as cley.” The cross and riches are no substitute for true Christian work, and people should pay more attention to their fellow man, for he is the one made in God’s image, and thus the only terrestrial creation deserving of reverence.

Wycliffe’s accusation that instead of living in poverty, “bere we þe cros” has special significance in an age when crosses were intricately carved, often made of silver or gold, or at least gilded, and covered with precious gems. This fact made them prominent offenders of the misuse of church monies. Much of Wycliffe’s condemnations of the Church revolved around this idea of what he perceived as frivolously squandered

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102 Wycliffe, Apology, 48.
money. Money used to decorate churches and altars became merely “wasted treasure hanging on stocks and stones” which could be better “spent in defence of the kingdom, and relieving of the poor commons.”¹⁰³ For Wycliffe, the funds that good Christians spent on pilgrimages, especially abroad and to Rome was little more than “theft,” especially because even if one should “go on pilgrimage all thy life” it will “not bring thy soul to heaven.”¹⁰⁴ All Lollards agreed on the pernicious influence of wealth in Medieval Christianity, and were united in their condemnation of rich crosses and roods, elaborate reliquaries, goblets and tapestries, expensive pilgrimages, and the money sent directly to Rome in the form of tithes and indulgences. One can imagine a religion where money was not sent to Rome or used to create rich, but ultimately useless, religious objects appealed to the English population, whose economic situation was fairly dire.¹⁰⁵ Yet when the richness and expense of decorative crosses was stripped away, Lollards did not present a unified front on the symbol of the cross itself.

Since adornment was the most egregious reason that crosses were unacceptable, some Lollards ended up compromising, and believed that there was nothing inherently reprehensible about use of a plain, unadorned wooden cross. This was Wycliffe’s perspective, since he believed that a wooden cross could serve as a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice equally well as a rich one, without the misappropriation of funds and with the

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¹⁰⁴ Wycliffe, “Expositio Decalogi” in Tracts and Treatises, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Regional variations and fluctuations make blanket statements about the economic situation of peasants impossible, but it is fair to say that they did not enjoy a high standard of living, and the reality of bad harvests guaranteed a lack of security. See Richard Britnell and Ben Dodds, editors, Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: Common Themes and Regional Variations, (Hertfordshire: University Of Hertfordshire Press, 2009) and Ben Dodds and Christian D. Liddy, eds. Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Richard Britnell (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2011).
added effect of reminding devotees that Jesus came from humble origins. Thus, some Lollards accepted the value in having reverence for the cross, assuming that it inspired reflection on and glorification of God. Others, such as the tailor William Hardy, advocated for universal censure and unequivocally declared the blasphemy inherent in the cross, stating that “the signe of the crosse is the signe of Antecrist, and no more worship ne reverence oweth be do to the crosse than oweth be do to the galwes whiche men be hanged on.”

In all cases, however, when that reverence spilled over into outright worship, it became idolatrous. The difference between using an image to focus one’s mind on the divine, and interpreting the image itself as a projection of the divine was, as the church fathers established, a dangerous and slippery slope. Unsurprisingly, given this devolution of reverence into idolatry, there existed within the Lollard movement an iconoclastic strain, or a contingent of those who actively sought to destroy images. While their targets were primarily sculptures, paintings and crosses were also condemned, not because of any inherent evil within the images, but in order to prevent bout the danger of idolatry. Wycliffe himself makes this clear when he writes, “It is evident that images may be made both well and ill: well in order to rouse, assist, and kindle the minds of the faithful to love God more devoutly; and ill when by reason of images there is deviation from the true faith”.

Despite the disagreement, Lollard perspectives on images of the cross became a defining feature of their movement, making an appearance in the Twelve Conclusions, which in 1395 were allegedly nailed to the doors of Westminster Hall during a

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Parliamentary session. This document condemned “þe pilgrimage, preyeris and offringis made to blynde rodys and to deue ymages of tre and of ston, ben ner of kin to ydolatrie and fer from almesse dede.” Here again, however, the focus is on pilgrimage, worship, and offering money to images which do no good for those who were truly needy, rather than the mere existence of crosses. From either Wycliffe’s more moderate approach, or Hardy’s pronouncement of the cross as evil, both were abhorrent to the practices of the established church, both in Rome and of England.

While detractors such as Wycliffe believed that images could provide an important function within Christianity to educate the illiterate, not even this argument was universally accepted by Lollards. When Arundel questioned Thorpe about images, his reply that they were not to be worshipped or used even as a “kalender to lewde men þat neiper kunnen, ne wolen be leerned to knowe God bi his word” indicates that this was not adequate reasoning for their inclusion within the faith. For hardliners such as Thorpe, the Bible and the word of God alone should be enough. Beyond this, even if they were to be used as books for the illiterate, there was nothing to be gained by making them so rich. Rich images should be destroyed, just “as bokis shulden be ʒif þei maden mencion and tauȝten þat Crist was naylid on þe crosse wiþ þus myche gold and siluer and precious cloþis, as a breeche of gold endentid wiþ perry, and shoon of siluer and a croune frettid ful of precious iewelis.” In the centuries following the height Lollard movement, Thorpe’s view, rather than Wyclif’s, gained prominence since the idea that images served as books for the illiterate became increasingly obsolete.

109 Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards, in Selections from English Wycliffite Writings, edited by Anne Hudson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 27.
110 British Library MS Additional 24202, ff. 26-28v, as quoted in Hudson, English Wycliffite Writings, 83-84.
Defenders of images often fell back on the education explanation when pressed on their existence. Especially before the invention of the moveable-type printing press made books far more accessible, literacy rates were low throughout Europe, and England was no exception.\footnote{Calculating literacy rates, even defining the word “literacy,” is an extremely complicated proposition, with an extensive and dedicated historiography. Estimates range from 1% of the population to 60%, with immense variance between parish, class, occupation and gender. For classic works on the subject, see H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers, 1475-1557*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), and for more recent work see Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Timothy Rosendale, *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).} This purpose was endorsed by Thomas Aquinas, and drew much of its justification from his support. In addition to literacy, however, there was the issue of language, since the language of the Bible, and the mass, was Latin. Since people could not be properly educated in a language that they neither read or understood, the Lollards argued that if there was an acceptable English translation of the Bible, then the images would already be rendered redundant, and therefore unnecessary.\footnote{Gayk, 1-3.} Such a translation existed in the fifteenth century (popularly attributed to Wycliffe but not actually created by him) but its use was expressly forbidden by Arundel’s *Constitutions* at the council of Oxford.\footnote{See Stephen Edmund Lahey, *John Wyclif* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Elizabeth Solopova, ed., *The Wycliffite Bible: Origin, History and Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).} Vernacular Bibles still circulated in the 15th century, but they were relatively rare, and actively sought and destroyed by the authorities. Even without the censure of the authorities, an English translation would have only gone so far in educating the populace, considering that literacy rates did not rise significantly until after the invention of the moveable-type printing press. While the desire to spread an accessible version of the Bible was certainly noble, the fact that very few would be capable of reading even an
English version was likely largely overlooked by Wycliffe and his initial cadre of Oxford-educated followers. Thus, the issue of an English Bible was not widely debated until after the end of the Lollard movement, yet their arguments would be recycled in the 16th century, and used as a justification for the removal of images during the English Reformation.

In many respects, the difference between the Lollard views and that of the Church was one of scale. All parties agreed that idolatry was wrong -- the difference arose from the definition of idolatry, and whether images could be venerated without a person committing idolatry, a debate which was not settled even within Lollardy. Lollards did not believe that there was sharp enough divide between the representation of the image, and the adoration for that, and the things represented. Ironically, though this was more in line with the view of the Church Fathers, by the 14th century it had become heresy. The work of theologians such as Aquinas, and the inarguable power of having an outward, easily identifiable symbol to define a religion had turned heterodoxy into orthodoxy.

There was much among the Lollard teachings and practices which appealed to people, and certainly assisted in spreading their particular brand of heresy. For one thing, the Lollards placed a high premium on education, and encouraged both literacy and debates. Since Lollards were itinerants, it was common practice for Lollards, after delivering their vernacular sermons in a community, to leave written copies with the congregation. This allowed not only for greater understanding among the congregants, but also gave the preachers a chance to engage with lay people in religious discussion when their circuits returned them over subsequent months.\textsuperscript{114} While Catholics preached

\textsuperscript{114} Hudson, \textit{Premature Reformation}, 184-186. See also Anne Hudson, “‘Springing cockle in our clene corn’: Lollard Preaching in England around 1400,” in \textit{Christendom and its Discontents: Exclusion},
in Latin, and brooked no discussion or debate about the meaning and interpretation of scripture, the Lollards encouraged open communication in a familiar language. The breakdown of the church and its resultant social structures during the 14th century, and the existential and religious questions which the plague engendered found no outlet among the Catholic church, but the Lollards offered an open forum. This new mode of religious instruction allowed the English people a chance to make sense of their world again.

Much of what the Lollards wrote would be reiterated during the English Reformation, especially the more nationalistic elements condemning the wealth sent abroad -- “the first fruits [which] go to the bishop of Rome” -- that could instead be used within England. There is something of an English patriot in Wycliffe, who advocated for an English Bible, desired the education of the common man, and criticized the influence which the foreign, and corrupt, Papacy had over the land. While his contemporary Chaucer demonstrated the literary and poetical value of English, Wycliffe attempted to do the same for religious thought and power. While Henry VIII saw the potential for increased power and wealth from a break with Rome, Edward VI, and his advisors, focused on the religious implications of the Reformation. During Edward’s reign, the most zealous aspects of Lollard writing, preaching, and teaching would not only find acceptance, but be taken to their most extreme, and iconoclastic, conclusion.


Chapter 3 – The Henrician and Edwardian Reformations

In 1526, the first edition of William Tyndale’s Bible reached England. Printed in Germany, Tyndale added new fuel to debates about the vernacular Bible, which had been a contentious issue in England since the Wycliffe Bible from the late 14th century. Church officials persecuted proponents of vernacular scripture and theological works in the 15th century, and deemed possession of such “Lollard” texts more than sufficient grounds for accusations of heresy, though not necessarily evidence enough for conviction and execution.\(^{116}\) This opposition drove vernacular religious books underground in England, suppressing their distribution for the next hundred years. The Lollard movement had laid the groundwork for Tyndale’s book, a new Bible rendered in common English, augmented by religious commentaries, and influenced by the work of Martin Luther, and a readership was nearly guaranteed. Unsurprisingly, Tyndale’s brazen disregard for church law incurred the wrath of many orthodox Catholics, including Thomas More. Church officials gave More, whose previously published refutations of Luther had given him theological prominence, permission to read Tyndale’s work with the sole purpose of being able to contest it. The consequent debate spanned the next several years, first resulting in More’s *Dialogue against Heresies*, then Tyndale’s *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, and a final return volley by More in *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*.\(^{117}\) The exchange is a dizzying display of theological knowledge and rhetoric, fueled by the arguments of the nascent Reformation and touching on nearly all aspects of religious life. Tyndale championed the source-based approach favored by Reformers,


while More represented the traditional Catholic point of view. Among the points debated, the use of images and relics played a crucial part.

In his *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, Tyndale addressed what he perceived as the fetishization of the cross by Catholics, writing, “But the abuse of þ thynge is evell…as to beare a pece of the cross aboute a man/ thynkyng that so long as that ys aboute hym spyrytes shall not come at him/ his enimies shall do him no bodyly harme/ all causes shall go on his side even for beringe it aboute him.”¹¹⁸ For Tyndale, using the cross as a means of physical protection was superstition and idolatry, since there was no power in the image of the cross to accomplish anything. Tyndale was not, however, an iconomach, which is to say, an opponent of the use of images.¹¹⁹ Much like Wyclif nearly 150 years previously, Tyndale accepted that an image could be used in a proper Christian manner, “If (for an ēsample) I take a pece of the crosse of christe ād make a little crosse therof and beare it aboute me/ to loke theron with a repētinge hert… to put me in remēbraunce that the body of christ was broken ād his bloud [s]hed theron/ for my sinnes…then it servith me and I not it and doeth me þ same seruice as yf I red þ testamēt in a boke”.¹²⁰ Since the majority of the English population was illiterate, supporters of images argued for their use as books open to anyone, allowing the laity (and sometimes clergy) to understand the scripture and providing religious education. Tyndale was not really presenting new arguments, but rather rehashing ones that had been around for centuries, though he was giving them new life. Like many who came before, the

¹¹⁹ This term is used to distinguish opponents of the use of images from iconoclasts, who were those members of society who actively sought to destroy them.
¹²⁰ Tyndale, *answere unto Sir Thomas Mores dialogue*, 35v.
cross’s place in religious life distressed him. Christians saw it as a protective talisman to drive away demons and a remedy for sickness; it was an object of reverence, and the literal centerpiece of churches. It is impossible for modern readers to comprehend the plurality of meanings and deep cultural and religious significance of the cross for English men and women of the 16th century, and how the Reformation challenged and complicated their structures of belief, but we can achieve a reasonably complex and nuanced understanding of it.

Yet when William Tyndale translated the Bible into the vernacular and printed it for the masses in 1526, literacy rates had been rapidly rising, and what the Lollards had been persecuted for suggesting earlier entered into more theologians’ thoughts and works.121 Some, however, still felt that images were more effective than reading the Bible to inspire devotion: “For often man is more steryd be syght þan be herynge or redyngge.”122 Yet the tide was turning, clergy and laity alike began to increasingly perceive images as no longer needed, and even critics from within the Catholic church began to regard them as idols, expressly forbidden by the Second Commandment. This controversy was given room to grow as a result of the religious debates taking place in England at this time, stirred by the arrival of the Reformation. The Reformation reached England when Henry VIII, motivated far more by matrimonial and political exigencies than theological disputes, broke from the Roman Church, and, as a result, in England, perhaps more than in any other European country, the religious upheaval was intertwined with politics. Yet what Henry began as a means of acquiring personal and political

122 *Dives and Pauper*, 82.
freedom from the papacy became a religious reformation in the truest sense during the reign of Edward VI, challenging the beliefs, symbols, and rituals, in brief the entire religious system, of English men and women. At the center of that life was the cross, which existed as both a religious and magical artifact, with a deep, ritualistic meaning to much of the English population. As a result, the debate over the cross serves as a microcosm for the greater cultural, societal, and religious debates that were raging in England throughout the sixteenth century.

In the mid-1530s, the cross, along with other iconography, came under assault in England, and these attacks went far beyond words, spilling over into the literal destruction of images by iconoclasts. The initial attacks did not manage to destroy the belief many had in the power of the cross or their admiration for it; futile attempts to permanently erase it from both the English consciousness and landscape were renewed in 1547, and again in the 1560s. Though grounded in religion, the dispute was influenced by much more than theology, and the lack of a sustained attack upon cross symbolism and veneration made the issue particularly difficult for reformers.

While Henry had been the one to instigate the break with Rome, and held a deep dislike of the papal structure, he was not evangelically minded. The “Defender of the Faith” remained deeply and sincerely “attached to much of the traditional framework of Catholicism.” Despite his personal beliefs, Henry’s actions created an opening for many of the ideas and issues which had been championed by the Lollards and, more recently, by reformers on the continent such as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, to gain

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123 Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 448.
momentum within England. Significantly, the arrival of their ideas required a reexamination of Christian practices, as reformers desired to create a new, purified church separated from the corruption and profligacy of Rome. Buttressed by the increased literacy rates and vernacular Bible, one of the main points of contention for reformers was the use of images, including the cross, which, not surprisingly, was one of the most numerous of the Christian symbols. During the era of Henrician reforms, the debate concerning the idolatrous use of images found powerful champions in Thomas Cromwell, Thomas Cranmer, and Hugh Latimer.

Thomas Cromwell rose from relatively humble origins to become the chief minister to Henry VIII by making a name for himself as a man of extreme competency and efficiency. Cromwell helped usher in a new era in English politics by enacting many administrative reforms, helping create a more modern state and knitting the country of England into a more cohesive polity. Perhaps most famously, Cromwell assisted the King with annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, in effect ushering in English Reformation by making it politically possible. Cromwell met a premature end when, due to his unwavering support of Anne of Cleves while Henry courted Catherine Howard, he was executed in 1540 for treason, a decision the monarch would come to sorely regret.

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Of these three men, and indeed all the men in England, it is likely that no figure was more instrumental in the assault on the cross than Thomas Cranmer. Henry made Cranmer the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1532, and he had remained one of the main voices for reform throughout the king’s reign. Upon the ascension of Edward, the Duke of Somerset, himself a steadfast protestant, generally let Cranmer progress in the manner he deemed most appropriate for matters of religion, with the young king’s full support. Cranmer was the force behind the doctrinal changes during Edward’s brief kingship, including writing the First Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and the revised edition three years later.

Hugh Latimer ascended in power during the 1530s to his eventual position as the Bishop of Worcester, and was perhaps the best embodiment of revived Lollard principles during the English Reformation. Both before and after his long imprisonment during the reign of Henry VIII (1540-1547), Latimer was widely held as one of the best preachers in England for his style and power. Whereas Cranmer was doctrinally and ecclesiastically minded, Latimer was first and foremost a preacher, dedicated to bringing the ideas of the Reformation to the people, and during his sermons he returned time and time again to the lot of the poor. Much in the vein of Wycliffe and the Lollards, he was socially minded, stressing both the obligations that Christians have to their neighbors and the excesses of the Catholic Church. Being firmly ensconced in the Reformation camp, both Latimer and Cranmer met their end at the stake during the Catholic resurgence of Queen Mary.

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126 The use of the word “protestant” at this time is anachronistic, this term did not come into common usage until the end of the period being discussed in this work. Nevertheless, I have opted to employ the term as a substitute for “reformer” to help in avoiding repetition of terms.

With tepid backing from Henry and within their overlapping, but separate realms, these three men largely led the charge against what were considered the more Catholic elements of the church, including ideas of purgatory, pilgrimage, worship of the saints, the use of medals and trinkets, and the adoration of images. Additionally, these figures sought to reconfigure the understanding of many elements of Christian worship, such as holy water and the Eucharist, and the main thrust of the movement was an attempt to dispel magical thinking. Reformers felt that many Catholic practices encouraged destructive superstitions and pagan beliefs, and therefore detracted from the true meaning of Christianity.

The assault on the cross fell into this larger attack on superstitious elements of Christianity. Christians still strongly believed in magic, and felt that the magic of Christianity was the most powerful of all. Beyond the words of prayer, the symbols and physical items blessed by a priest or distributed by the church were thought to have a power all their own. Holy water could not only drive devils out of the human body when employed during exorcism, but also increase the fertility of fields, and the Eucharist could be used as a panacea for numerous ailments, could protect crops from pests if scattered in a field, help to woo women, or increase the productivity of bees. Recognizing that the population often held these heretical beliefs, the First Book of Common Prayer, released in the reign of Edward VI in 1549, tried to mitigate the issue by commanding priests to put the bread directly into the mouth of any receiving

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128 The Historian James Kearney points out that the very word “trinket” either entered the English language, or at the very least because significantly more common, during the 1530s-1540s. That this would occur precisely during the time of the Henrician reforms and assaults against images is likely no coincidence, especially as the usage focused on those decorations which were considered to be popery, magical, or outright inefficual. See James J. Kearney, “Trinket, Idol, Fetish: Some Notes on Iconoclasm and the Language of Materiality in Reformation England.” Shakespeare Studies (2000): 257-261

129 Thomas, 29-36.
communion. This was instituted in direct reaction to those who “conueyghed the same [body of Christ] secretelye awaye, kept it with them, and diuersely abused it to superstition and wickedness.” Not surprisingly, this action did not solve the problem, as a communicant could receive the bread in their mouth, and, rather than swallowing it as intended, still carry it away to perform their magic, whether benign or malicious.

Though, officially, crosses and crucifixes were no longer intended or understood to drive away demons or evil spirits, but to inspire remembrance of Jesus’s sacrifice or the congregant’s promised renunciation of sins, old systems of thought persisted. The belief in the protective power of the cross remained alive and well, as attested to in the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace uprisings in the North of England, where in the manner of crusaders, the rebels took the cross as their symbol. In the words of Hugh Latimer, “They arm themselves with the sign of cross and the wounds, and go clean contrary to him that bare the cross and suffered those wounds.” While the uprising was essentially non-religious, these men wanted to depict themselves as righteous crusaders fighting for a noble cause, no doubt hoping to reap the same benefits from taking the cross that preachers had promised crusaders to Jerusalem in the previous centuries. In this case, however, the cross did not grant enough protection, as the uprising was quelled with ruthless efficiency.

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130. The booke of the common prayer and administration of the Sacramentes, and other rites and ceremonies of the Churche: after the use of the Churche of England (London: Edouardi Whitchurch, 1549), 139r.
131. Thomas, 34-35.
132. Despite the name, there is no clear religious motivation for the Pilgrimage. While it may, in part, have been a result of the recent religious changes in England, there were many social and economic factors at play which make the motivations anything but clear, and certainly not uniform. For Henry VIII, the matter was clearly one of sovereignty, rebellion, and state power, not religious upheaval. See R. W. Hoyle, The Pilgrimage of Grace and the Politics of the 1530s (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and the extensive work of Michael Bush on the subject, especially Michael Bush, The Pilgrimage of Grace: A Study of the Rebel Armies of October 1536 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
In 1538, William Gray, one of the propagandists working for Thomas Cromwell, composed and ballad with the title *Fantasie of Idolatrie*, in which he mocked those who “Wyll not be conuerted/But rather styll be blynde./Ronnyng hyther and thyther/We can not tell whether./In offryng candels and pence./To stones and stockes/And to olde rotten blockes/That came, we know not frō whense.” Of primary concern to Gray was the absurdity of pilgrimages and the money offered to various saints, relics, and idols, each of which was allegedly capable of, and responsible for, curing a specific problem or issue. One of the occurrences that provided Gray with fodder for his satire was uncovering the falsehoods of the Rood of Grace from Boxley in Kent. This purportedly miraculous object drew pilgrims from around the country, who had heard how the crucified Jesus appearing on the cross would physically respond to worthy supplicants. When iconoclasts removed the rood in the same year that Gray was composing his ballad, they found that it had wires connecting to the hands, eyes and mouth, allowing the monks to manipulate the figure into performing blessings – a fitting demonstration of the deception offered by the cross.135

The opportunity to publicly discredit pilgrimage sites, iconography, and the Catholic institution was a windfall for men like Gray, who wrote later in the same work, “For the rode of grace/Hath lost his place,/And is rubbed on the gall/For false deuotion/Hath lost his promotion,/And is broken in peces small./He was made to Iogle/His eyes would gogle/He wold bend his browes & frowne,/With his head he would nod/Lyke a proper yong God/His chaftes would go vp & downe.”136 Church motivation

for such activities was nearly always monetary, since sensational demonstrations would encourage more pilgrims to make the journey, and more pilgrims resulted in more offerings. It is not surprising that the competition for pilgrims, and therefore wealth, drove some parishes to such extreme lengths and corruption. Men like Gray were able to bring knowledge of the shams to average people, as well as leverage them to mock the Catholic institution and advance the iconoclastic agenda. Later, in the 1540s, conservatives like Stephen Gardiner expressed dismay and annoyance at these popular ballads, for fear that they might encourage “unbridled religious innovations.” For reformers, however, the impetus to remove Catholic elements from the “pure” Christian religion had both religious and economic reasons. Not only did they wish to remove idolatrous symbols from churches, but to prevent pilgrimages abroad and thereby keep money inside of England. The Lollards certainly would have appreciated the message, though the focus on keeping the wealth in England was not used for the charitable purposes for which Wycliffe advocated, but rather to fund wars and reinforce the social hierarchy.  

One of the most prominent examples of how depriving the church of funds did not benefit the lower classes can be found in the distribution of monies gained through Henry’s dissolution of the monasteries beginning in 1536. Done without any long-term strategy for how to use the funds, Henry, with the aid of the ever efficient Cromwell, was able to gain lands which exponentially increased the Crown’s income. Yet, with expensive wars to fund, none of the money was used to aid the poorer classes in any way, nor did the act of wresting the lands from Church control result in windfalls for the

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needy. The monasteries and chantries were often engaged in charitable works themselves, but as the houses were dissolved, the poor relief and assistance that they provided to the sick and needy were not replaced. Later, when Henry sold the lands, which he did at market value merely to acquire funds quickly, they went to wealthy landowners, reinforcing the existing social structures. The net result was to increase the wealth of the crown and the upper classes, while depriving the poor and sick of the succour previously rendered by the religious houses.138

Most of the Reformation elements of Henry’s time were perpetrated by his ministers and advisors, such as Cranmer and Latimer, with Henry providing a conservative brake to their protestant agenda.139 In 1536, Henry VIII delivered the Articles Devised by the Kinges Hyghnes Majestie to Stablyshe Christen Quietnes and Unites amonge Us, commonly referred to as the “Ten Articles.” Its very title implies that the king and his ministers recognized the confusion present in England, given the recent separation from Rome, and may have been issued in regards to reports in the north about the impending Pilgrimage of Grace. As such, the articles were designed to combat the “dyversitie in opinions, as have growen and sprongen in this our realme,” and to clarify which aspects of ceremony were necessary for salvation, and which were merely valuable and respectable customs to be continued for the sake of tradition.140 Firstly, the articles

139 While the use of the term “protestant” is anachronistic, not coming into fashion until the end of the time period being discussed, I have opted to use it interchangeably with terms such as “reformer” and “Evangelical.”
140 Articles Devised by the Kinges Hyghnes Majestie to Stablyshe Christen Quietnes and Unites amonge Us, and to avoyde contentious opinions, which articles be also approved by the consent and determination of the hole clergie of this realme, 1536, ii-r.
declare that, as far as images were concerned, the laity were to be taught that they should not kneel before them, nor make offerings to them “whyther it be of Christe, of the crosse, of our lady, or of any other saynte beside.” Yet, an exception is made for “[c]repynge to the crosse and humblyng our selves to Christe on good Fryday before the Crosse, & there offryng unto Christe before the same, and kyssynge of it in memorye of our redemption by Christe made upon the crosse.” This exception was made at Henry’s insistence, who viewed creeping to the cross as a pillar of the Christian faith, and he devoutly performed it until his death. Nor did the subsequent activities help to alleviate this discomfort.

The ceremony of creeping to the cross was a standard activity on Good Friday, and a crucial part of the Easter ritual, and despite Henry’s personal stance, it became a lightning rod for objections to the cross. Like the entire question of images, it would have no clear resolution in the years of Henry’s reign, and even when the ceremony was univocally condemned during Edward’s reign, it was still performed diligently, albeit more covertly, across of England, and would be for decades. Yet, creeping to the cross was an obvious target for reformers, since it was an elaborate ritual replete with the ceremony, potential idolatry, and lavishness which so incensed reformers.

One account of this activity comes from Timothy Naogeorgus’s 1553 Regnum papisticum, which was translated into English as The popish kingdome, or reigne of Antichrist by Barnabe Googe in 1570. Though a work from the continent, Googe obviously perceived enough truth (or at least propaganda value) in Naogeorgus’s description of Catholic ceremonies that they would sound familiar to his English readers,
many of whom continued the practice of creeping to the cross despite the official objections of the English Church. Heavily inspired by the German Reformation movement and anti-papal sentiment, Naogeorgus describes the tradition at Easter in a thoroughly unflattering way:

Two Priestes the next day following [Good Friday], vpon their shoulders beare, The Image of the Crucifix, about the altar neare:
Being clad in coape of crimozen die, and dolefully they sing:
At length before the steps his coate pluckt of they straight him bring
And vpon Turkey Carpettes lay him downe full tenderly,
With cushions vnderneath his heade, and pillowes heaped hie:
Then flat vpon the grounde they fall, and kisse both hande and féete,
And worship so this wooden God, with honour farre vnméete.
Then all the shauen sort falles downe, and foloweth them herein,
As workemen chiefe of wickednesse, they first of all begin:
And after them the simple soules, the common people come,
And worship him with diuers giftes, as Golde, and siluer some
And others corne or egges againe, to poulshorne persons swéete,
And eke a long desired price, for wicked worship méete.
How are the Idoles worshipped, if this religion here
Be Catholike, and like the spowes of Christ accounted dere?143

One can understand the discomfort that this would cause the element of Christian society who wished to purge their religion of pagan practices, or any ritual which had no Biblical basis, yet had been deemed essential to the faith by the Catholic Church. Naogeorgus certainly had a point in drawing the comparison between idol worship and this part of Catholicism, since, except for the fact the article being worshipped was a depiction of a monotheistic deity, this activity would not have seemed out of place in England a thousand years previously.

After ritually parading around the cross, laying it down on rich, soft cushions, crawling towards it, and kissing the hands and feet (in an order that reinforced the

existing social hierarchy), the object was taken, wrapped in linens, and ceremonially entombed. To complete the reenactment on Easter Sunday, the crucifix was taken back out, paraded around in a procession, and again “crept” towards and kissed. This combination of ceremonies, especially to detractors, did not leave much distinction between the symbolic representation of the deity, and God himself. The effect of idolatry was often compounded by the fact that many of these crucifixes were designed to hold the eucharist, which was, until the changes brought about in the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, transubstantiated into the physical flesh of Jesus Christ.144 It is no wonder that reformers failed, or perhaps refused, to distinguish the Easter ceremonies from idol worship.

In regards to the actual reformation of the church, and especially on the issue of images and the cross, Henry perpetually lagged behind his ministers and vocal opponents of Catholic ceremonies. Henry routinely protected the use of images, and his insistence on it highlights the active debate and controversy surrounding the use of the cross. The running theme of Henry’s conservatism is attested to in the 1539 *Act for Abolishing a Diversity of Opinions*, more commonly known as the “Six Articles,” which reaffirmed that the Church of England maintained many of the fundamentals of Roman Catholicism, such as belief in the celibacy of priests (despite Archbishop Cranmer’s own conjugal status), and auricular confession, though it made no specific mention of images.145

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144 Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 28-31. Thought the belief in transubstantiation was denied by the 1549 prayer book, the sacrament of communion remained largely unchanged. It wasn’t until 1552 that the act was changed to merely be a communal meal in commemoration of the last supper. See John N. King, “Paul’s Cross and the Implementation of Protestant Reforms under Edward VI,” in *Paul’s Cross and the Culture of Persuasion in England, 1520-1640*, edited by Torrance Kirby and P. G. Stanwood (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 141-142.
was eager to maintain at least the outward appearance of a church that was essentially Catholic, except with himself, rather than the Pope, at its head. While Henry’s protection of ceremony applied a brake to the progress, his equivocation and inconsistencies did not go unnoticed by contemporaries such as Thomas Cranmer, who wished to completely do away with Mass, images, and ceremony. Meanwhile, however, the people of England were forced to contend with these seemingly arbitrary distinctions between the acceptable and forbidden uses of images, and the competing messages coming from Henry, and those who spoke with his support.

During the 1543 explication of the Second Commandment in *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christen Man*, the use of crosses and crucifixes defended first, before any attempt is made to explain what is actually forbidden. As long as people do not “do godly honour unto them” images are permissible, and indeed useful as “bokes for unlearned people” This allowance applied to both images of Christ and the saints in many forms, “As for example, the image of our Savior hangeth on the crosse in the roode, or is paynted in clothes, walles, or wyndowes.” Indeed, if congregants received proper and adequate instruction, Henry actively encouraged using the “boke of the roode” to reflect on the sacrifice of Jesus. As long as people were making their obeisance to God through the images, and not to the images, it was perfectly acceptable “to knele before them, and to crepe to the crosse,” despite the fact that this was in contradiction to the earlier prohibition established in the Ten Articles.146 That people should be educated enough to understand the theological implications of their worship practices, yet require images because they remain illiterate and do not have access to the written word, is

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146 *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christen Man, set furthe by the kynges maestie of Engelande, &c.* 1543, Piv-r - Qi-r.
striking a fine balance. Reformers, obviously, would have rather provided Bibles, homilies, and textual hermeneutics to the congregation to be read aloud, rather than have them kneel to and kiss carvings.

William Turner was one of the voices who decried this annual practice, and despite dedicating his work to King Henry, in that same year as *A Necessary Doctrine* Turner declared in his *The huntyng and fyndyng out of the Romyshe foxe*, “Is the crepynge of the crosse agreinge wyth the worde of God: Whatsoever ye saye, I saye nay.” While the case of the cross in 1543 remained thoroughly undecided, with the waters muddied by Henry’s vacillation and the alternate messages from both reform minded elements of society, as well as those who wrote and thought with the backing of men like Cromwell. Much of this became more straightforward upon Henry’s death, as the message became more consistent and clear, answering univocally, at least from the Crown, the question of the place that the images would have in the nascent Church of England.

The death of Henry led to the ascension of the child-king Edward VI, which pushed the English Reformation forward in new ways. From a young age, Edward had been firmly entrenched in the world of Protestantism, Henry having chosen some of the best Cambridge minds to school him. With Henry gone, the new, protestant-educated king allowed virtually free reign to reformers, which included his uncle, Edward Seymour, the Duke of Somerset, and later John Dudley, the Duke of Northumberland, the

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147 William Turner, *The Huntyng and Fyndyng out of the Romyshe foxe*, (Basil: 1543), Eii-v
148 Aston, Broken Idols, 727-730.
149 While many educators played a small role in Edward’s education, the most important were the Cranmer-supported Richard Cox, John Cheke, and the French Calvinist John Belmain. See Jordan, *Young King*, 40-44.
regents who successively managed the affairs of the realm for Edward, who was only nine years old upon his coronation. These men worked alongside Cranmer to move ahead with as many changes to traditional religion as they believed the people would accept. Edward thus brought new injunctions against ceremony, relics, and images, though not immediately or aggressively. Cranmer recognized that Protestants, though vocal and in positions of power, still represented a minority of the population, no more than a third.\textsuperscript{150}

While the doctrinal reformation under Edward began slowly, it moved steadily forward, incrementally making the Church of England more protestant.

For reformers, the way to make England protestant was through preaching, and Cranmer set out to educate more men to become preachers, though, of course, such education would require time. Another issue that Cranmer faced was the need for a clear and consistent message being delivered throughout the land. To address both of these problems with the protestant agenda, Cranmer published the \textit{Certayne Sermons or Homelies} in July of 1547. These twelve tracts were designed to be read in lieu of sermons, which could, and did, vary depending on the beliefs and inclinations of the speaker. The homilies, on the other hand, were written by reform-minded, educated men and had Cranmer’s personal stamp of approval. While the sermons are not completely uniform (having different authors), they are broadly protestant, censorious of images, and vehemently anti-Papist, though they are more Catholic in their doctrine than the English church would come to embrace towards the end of Edward’s reign.\textsuperscript{151}


Unsurprisingly, among these sermons are admonitions against worshipping images, and contempt at the acts of veneration towards them. The *An Homelie, or Sermon, of Good Woorkes Annexed unto Faithe* is particularly vehement in the rejection of images, stating that “Never had the Jewes in their moste blyndenesse so many pilgrimages unto images, nor used so muche knelyng, kissyng and censyng of them, as hath been used in oure tyme.” These sermons stop short of condemning crosses or crucifixes specifically, but they openly denounce pilgrimages, relics, and images in general. Without a specific exemption for the cross, as Henry provided in his *Six Articles*, listeners might very well, and correctly from Cranmer’s perspective, recognize the hypocrisy inherent in kneeling and praying to the cross.

Of course, preaching only works if those in the congregation not only hear, but listen and embrace the ideas being espoused. The combination of congregants being resistant to the ideas, as many were, and recalcitrant preachers reading them only grudgingly call into question their utility. Skepticism is especially warranted when one considers that it is an extremely generous assumption to believe that those unwilling clergy would read the homilies in their entirety, or at all, rather than picking and choosing the parts that fit their own personal doctrine or preaching completely independently. Overall, the impact of the homilies on the beliefs of the laity is dubious. Despite the uncertain efficacy of the use of the homilies, they at least attempted to impose some order on the official message about images, which was more than could be said about pronouncements during Henry’s reign. And while some within the population certainly

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152 Ronald B. Bond, *Certain Sermons or Homilies (1547) and a Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion (1570)* (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 110.
resisted the messages, others heard it and took it upon themselves to turn words into action.

At the outset of Edward’s reign in 1547, the removal of roods and crucifixes from churches was a common occurrence. Yet, these actions were taken without the approval of either Lord Protector Somerset or Archbishop Cranmer. Thus, the government mildly condemned these overzealous actors, and they attempted to slow the pace of reformation from the more radical elements of society, in order to allow it to progress in a measured way.153 In many places, however, these activities reached an equilibrium on their own, without the involvement of official sanctions or approval. Thus in Hadleigh, Suffolk, reformers removed many of the trappings of Catholicism, such as imagery, bells, and cloths, yet retained their organ for Easter services, and continued to conduct processions which employing a large cross, specifically preserved for that purpose.154 Although congregations within England were finding ways to balance reforms with traditional practices, the progress toward protestantism, especially the removal of the cross and crucifix from churches, made many outside observers uncomfortable.

One such man was the Ambassador from Charles V, François van der Delft, who expressed dismay in December of 1547 that the crucifix was not spared from the purges taking place, despite the official line proclaiming it exempt from such actions. Van der Delft insisted on a private meeting with the Lord Protector Somerset to discuss the matter, and urged Somerset, “to consider very carefully what [religious] innovations he introduced into the realm during the time of his government.” Somerset responded that

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153 Jordan, Young King, 146-149.
the act of taking down the crosses was to protect the populace from their own “superstitious simplicity” and to dissuade them from “offer[ing] out of their poverty both wheat and bread… to the profit of the priests, who already had enough to live upon.” The removal of all images from the church was not officially sanctioned by Archbishop Cranmer until February of 1548, and this same justification was once again used. Yet, even before this mandatum, Van der Delft reported back to the Emperor that many within the populace were displeased with the development, but were actively being mollified by sermons on the issue, in which the bishop produced manipulable “artificial figures” from erstwhile pilgrimage sites to prove the danger of such objects. Iconoclastic fervor towards these ersatz miraculous figures often led to their destruction in situ, yet keeping them extant likely suited the Reformers’ propaganda machine better for exactly this type of show-and-tell.

Public demonstrations of the falsehoods of relics and crosses and their subsequent destruction was a common occurrence, even from the time of Henry. This was the fate of the Rood of Grace from Boxley in Kent in February 1538. The cross was transported to London, and amid sermons against the use and veneration of images, the cross was publically, and communally, destroyed. As Van Der Delft observed, in November of 1547, a virtually identical exhibition took place, except with a manipulable picture of Jesus emerging from the sepulchre and a statue of the Virgin Mary offered as proof of the evils of idols and pilgrimages. Once the preacher finished his fulmination, some of the

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155 Jordan, Young King, 184.
attendant “boyes brooke the idolls into peaces.” By enlisting boys, specifically, to destroy the images no doubt helped to inculcate a disregard of the cross in the younger generation. Cranmer and his cronies were realists, and worked hard to foster this reformed belief in the younger generation.

No doubt there were many adults who would have been willing to take part in the destruction, as evidenced by the fact that one such man was crushed while dislodging a large rood a mere two weeks before. The more conservative priests offered this incident as evidence of God’s displeasure at their actions. The Catholically minded members of society would certainly have marvelled at this act of divine retribution, and the less fervent iconomachs were likely given pause by the inherent symbolism of a cross killing one of its assailants. Despite this, many of those involved would have seen this as a tragic accident, and iconoclastic ardor remained vigorous.

One of the main reasons that crosses escaped the fires of destruction was for the purpose of sale. Since evangelicals remained in the minority in England, many pious Catholics were willing to purchase church imagery for their own, personal use. Churches could, and did, turn a quick profit by selling their intricate roods and crosses. While some of this money may have ended up enriching the parish or aiding the needy, there was often an expense involved in replacing the removed objects, whether with painted scripture or the king’s arms. The fact that Edwardian injunctions called for the removal of images, but not necessarily their destruction, meant that parishes and individuals often squirreled their crosses away in hopes of a more Catholic future. Thus, upon the

ascension of Mary in 1553, John Jewel marveled at the sea of images and crosses which appeared as if from nowhere.161

When Cranmer progressed the Reformation through the 1543 publication of the first edition of the Book of Common Prayer, it did not necessarily have the desired result on the population. While the book was intended to quell diversity of opinion and create uniformity in worship, opposition to it incited open rebellion in the Western regions of England, namely Cornwall and Devon. The so-called Prayer Book Rebellions (or Western Rebellions) began around Easter in 1549 with some relatively minor disturbances, which was actually before the issuance of the new Book of Common Prayer, but it wasn’t until the summer that rebellion began in earnest.162 Certainly, the Western Rebellion was distinct from the widespread uprisings which occurred across England in 1549, which were almost solely motivated by economic issues such as currency debasement and enclosures, there was a strong religious impetus in the Cornwall uprising. Among the demands of the rebels were a return to the Six Articles of Henry, a restoration of the Latin Mass, and a restoration of images. Furthermore, conservative priests and clergy featured prominently among the leaders.163

Cornwall, being fairly remote from the center of political life and fairly inaccessible from the outside, remained insular, tight-knit, and closely tied to their

161 Aston, England’s Iconoclasts, 277-278.
162 Standard accounts have the rebellion beginning in Early June, but recent interpretations move the inception back to late June. For the standard dating, see F. Rose-Troup, The Western Rebellion of 1549 (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1913), Barrett Beer, Rebellion and Riot: Popular Disorder in England During the Reign of Henry VI (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982) 38-81 and Jordan, Young King, 441-443, 453-477. For the more recent dating, see Mark Stoyle, “‘Fullye Bente to Fighete Oute the Matter’: Reconsidering Cornwall’s Role in the Western Rebellion of 1549” The English Historical Review 129, no. 538 (June 2014): 549-577.
heritage, including the old forms of faith and religion.\textsuperscript{164} The time of Easter for the initial disturbances is noteworthy, and though there is no direct evidence, one might wonder if the new injunctions against creeping to the cross, which had been allowed, even encouraged, in Henry’s time, had been a strong motivator in provoking the initial stirrings of discontent. Even if this is not the case, opposition to the Reformation of religion were foremost in the expressed grievances and aims of the rebellion. Indeed, it was to traditionalists who were unwilling to forego their rituals, like the people of Cornwall, that the \textit{First Book of Common Prayer} refers to when it inveighs against those who “thinke it a great matter of conscience to departe from a piece of the least of theyr Ceremonies (they be so addicted to theyr old customes).”\textsuperscript{165}

Despite some of the negative reactions against it, the \textit{First Book of Common Prayer} was actually fairly conservative in its motions towards reform. The 1552 \textit{Book of Common Prayer} pushed the English Church in a much more protestant direction. Whereas the 1549 version was conspicuously silent on the problem of images, there are several condemnations against their use in the later version, including at the outset of Lent. Beyond the strictures against using images, even making them was denounced, with the book declaring “Cursed is the man that maketh any carved or molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and putteth it in a secret place to worship it.”\textsuperscript{166} This second edition, however, was not in circulation long enough.

\textsuperscript{165} “Of Ceremonies,” \textit{The booke of the common prayer}, fol. xxxiii-v
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{The Two Books of Common Prayer}, edited by Edward Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1841), 389
to make a significant impact, since it was outlawed under the Marian regime just a few months later in 1553.

While the prayer books dictated the structure of worship, and the overall doctrine of the Reformation, it is perhaps less telling than the *Catechismvs*, where Cranmer laid out the doctrinal direction that he wished the church to go. Intended to instruct children in the ways of the new church, Cranmer directly attacked the symbolism of the cross, and in doing so, showed his engagement with the Catholic debate. Though he did not cite Aquinas directly, he rejected the argument from those who claimed, “We kneele not to the ymage, but before the ymage, we worshippe not the ymage, but the thing which is represented by the ymage”.\(^{167}\) To which Cranmer asked that if they were not kneeling and showing adoration to the “ymage of the Cruycfyx....but to Christ….But why than doo they it whan they se the ymage, and not before?”\(^ {168}\) Cranmer was essentially attacking a simplified version of Aquinas’s argument that the cross represents Christ and is therefore deserving of *latria* which had been a staple of the Catholic defense for centuries. In his standard, no-nonsense manner, Cranmer cared little for Aquinas’s reasoning or theology, and he rejected it very simply, since “God doeth oftentymes in holye scripture call vpon you sayinge. Thou shalte not make to the any grauen ymage or lykenes of any creature, thou shalt not kneele, nor bow thy selfe downe to it.”\(^ {169}\) This outright rejection of subtle, periphrastic arguments in favor of straightforward reading of scripture was nothing new: the Lollards had employed it in the 14th and 15th centuries. Indeed, a similar debate

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\(^{168}\) Cranmer, *Catechismvs*, Dvi-v

\(^{169}\) Cranmer, *Catechismvs*, Cv-r.
involving an Archbishop of Canterbury had been recorded nearly a hundred and fifty years previously, except that Archbishop Arundel stood with the Catholics and the Lollard heretic William Thorpe was the one pointing to the Old Testament.

As Cranmer’s work in the *Catechismvs* shows, he was extensively indebted to the intellectual heritage of the Lollards. If you wish to observe and know God, Cranmer says, “loke not vpon a deafe, domme, blynde, lame, and deade ymage, made by a painter or caruers handes, but... loke vpon man who cā speake, see, smell, heare, feale, and go and hath lyfe, wyl, and reason, and whome no man but God himselfe made to be his lyuely image and similitude.”

Wycliffe himself had condemned the worship of “þingis formid of mannis craft”, instead advocating that Christians should be taking care of their fellow man, since “þe sowle of þe trewe man is þe temple of Crist.” Whereas Wycliffe and his followers were outside of, or at best minor players in, the Church and condemned, their views were now being espoused from the highest ranks of the English Church. Beyond this, Cranmer wrote them into the catechism, designed to instruct children in the basics of the Christian faith. Cranmer recognized that children were not as devoted to the rituals of the past as their parents, and influencing the younger generation would guarantee a reformed church of the future. Much like the preachers who recruited children to smash idolatrous objects, Cranmer wanted to ensure that children held images in disrepute, and the best way to do so was through a proper religious education.

Of the reformers, Hugh Latimer perhaps had the greatest impact on influencing the beliefs of the people, due to his reputation as a preacher. Latimer opted to focus much

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170 Cranmer, *Catechismvs*, Di-v
of his attention on funds that were spent on images and decorating churches, which particularly incensed him:

And I promise you, if you build a hundred churches, give as much as you can make to the gilding of saints, and honouring the church; and if thou go as many pilgrimages as the body can suffer...if thou leaves the works of mercy and the commandments undone, these works shall nothing avail thee.... Again, if you list to guild and paint Christ in your churches, and honour him in vestments, see that before your eyes the poor people die not for lack of meat, drink, and clothing. Then do you deck the very true temple of God\textsuperscript{172}

While later in his career, particularly during the reign of Edward, Latimer became increasingly opposed to images, as was required by time and circumstance, at this early point in the 1530s he mainly took issue with the fact that churches were elaborately decorated at the expense of the poor. Even under Edward, his objection remained primarily based on the fact that it filtered funds away from the poor, and was completely unnecessary for salvation, so that ceremonies involving the use of candles and the making of crosses were merely “snares and illusions of the devil.”\textsuperscript{173} While the religion that Latimer was preaching was in keeping with the prevailing winds under Edward - anti-papal, anti-images, and anti-ceremony - they had a much more positive social message than many other reformers were offering. Latimer took his adherence to textual sources quite seriously, preaching a religion that he believed reflected the life of Jesus. Perhaps unbeknownst by him, it also closely reflected the teachings of the Lollards: Wycliffe himself could have preached the above words, so closely did they adhere to Lollard doctrine.

\textsuperscript{172} Sermons by Hugh Latimer, 23-24.  
\textsuperscript{173} Sermons by Hugh Latimer, 499
Oftentimes, this idea of providing money of the church to the poor made its way into the work of the reformers, but it rarely, if ever, moved from theory into practice. When the first Parliament under Edward dissolved chantries, it specified that large portions of the “Money, Profit and Commodity shall be paid to poor people forever.”\(^{174}\) Much like the funds from the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry, however, the money largely went to reinforcing existing social structures at the expense of the lower classes, and the Council actually backtracked on the pronouncement to make it clear that the money was largely needed for war.\(^{175}\)

The act of dissolving the monasteries and chantries increasingly put the impetus for providing for the poor on the parishes, though they could provide charity to the same degree. The state passed a number of poor laws under the reigns of Henry and Edward, but they were not designed to alleviate poverty, merely to provide for those “deserving poor” who were willing, but unable to work, along with the very young, sick, and the old. The state had no desire to implement Lollard ideas of charity and benevolence, and the state now controlled the church.\(^{176}\) Whereas for Wycliffe the core of Christianity was in charity towards the true image of God in man, this was not the central message of the English church. Without adequate support from secular institutions, instances of wide scale Christian charity, if they were even possible, could have only resulted from the work of parish members. were not only insufficient to make up the difference This

\(^{174}\) Statutes at Large of England and Great Britain from Magna Charta to the Union of the Kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland, Edited by John Raithby (London: George Eyre and Andrew Strahan, 1811), 506-507.


tension between what was theologically desirable, what was socially encouraged, and what was politically expedient marked much of the English Reformation.

Despite the attacks on the cross, it was by no means erased from the English landscape. While reformers were sincere in their desire to eliminate this idolatrous image, at least two elements prevented their success: its ubiquity and its simplicity. It was on stained glass windows, and in images in books. It remained on coinage throughout the reign of Henry and Edward, it was affixed atop Edward’s crown, and represented in the royal arms. No Englishman would see the crown of the king and fail to observe the prominent cross, yet to refuse to kneel in the presence of that “idolatrous” symbol would have been exceptionally ill-advised for even the most stalwart puritan. The cross was still mentioned in the works of the church fathers, the Reformers, and influential theologians such as Aquinas. It was still being signed in the air over the heads of communicants and those being baptized, and anyone with two sticks could fashion a crude cross. The cross could not be erased from the collective consciousness overnight, because for centuries it had been an omnipresent symbol in the life of Christians. The mother of one William Maldon chastised her son, obviously influenced by Cranmer’s generationally targeted teachings, for his belief in the idolatry of the cross, reminding him that, “it was about the[e] when thou weare christened, and must be laid on the[e] when thou art deade.”

This was true for every person living in England before the Henrician reforms, accompanied by a firm belief in the rightful worship of that same symbol.

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It is especially important to note, and as has been made clear, not all Englishmen, even church leaders, were enthusiastic supporters of the Reformation. Nor were armed uprisings, such as the Pilgrimage of Grace and the Prayer Book Rebellion, the only means of resistance. In Kent, for instance, only the clergy appointed by Cranmer actively preached the Protestant agenda in line with injunctions. Many of them would adhere to the letter of the law, such as by not mentioning the pope or avoiding contentious issues, rather than actively preach against the pope.\textsuperscript{178} The work of the Edwardian reformation was not a wide-scale societal shift away from the trappings of Christianity, it was the forced change of a few zealots and demagogues. The religion that English men and women practiced had remained largely unchanged for hundreds of years, and they were not easily surrendered. The symbols, processions, regional cults of saints, holidays, candles, glimmering shrines and altars all, even if they had no direct antecedents, at least reflected the practices of pagans and early Christians. The splendor of the church and its decorations were the center of religious life, and religion was at the center of the entirety of existence. Traditions could not be extirpated easily from the intricate interweaving of society and religion, and thus they could not readily or quickly exchanged for words on a page. Rituals and symbols were at the center of Christianity, creeping to the cross and the cross itself defined what it was to be a Christian.

Particularly interesting in Googe’s work is the inclusion of eggs in the ceremony of creeping to the cross, which were a prominent part of many rituals of Easter time.\textsuperscript{179} In his 1554 \textit{declaration of Edmonde Bonners articles}, John Bale specifically mentions the

\textsuperscript{178} Ryrie, “Counting Sheep,” 96.
error of those clergy who continue “to holde forth the crosse for egges on good Friday.”

This aspect of the ritual had no relation to the story of Easter, either Biblically or in popular legend. The inclusion of the egg, present in Easter baskets and White House lawn festivities every year to this day, are a direct link to the pagan roots of the Easter celebration. Eggs are a symbol of fertility and birth, and the ritual death and rebirth of Jesus, personified by the cross, mimicked the rebirth of the earth (and that of Norse Gods). While the inclusion of reflection on the suffering of a personal and personified God for the sake of humanity, an original Christian touch, were new, the ceremony was merely superimposed on preexisting ritual. By attacking this ritual, Reformers were undertaking a massive overhaul of English religion, which far outweighed the changes made in the conversion of the island to Christianity originally. The atavistic, agrarian, and pagan ritual had survived 800 years of Christianity. While the ritual had continued to evolve, acquiring new symbolism and layers of meaning, it had deep roots, which Reformers now attempted to sever.

As reformers launched attacks against these pagan rituals, they offered no cohesive social replacement. While the thrust of the new protestant form of religion were to create a new Christianity, simpler in faith, creed, and ritual, it was overwhelming subtractionary. Many protestants differed in their faith; some closer to Luther, others to Knox, Calvin, or Zwingli. All were fundamentally Erastian, believing that the state should have the ultimate power in ecclesiastical matters, yet beyond that they did not have much to bind them, aside from a potent anti-Romanism.

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180 John Bale, *A declaration of Edmonde Bonners articles, concerning the cleargye of Lōdon dyocese whereby that execrable Antychriste, is in his righte colours reueled in the yeare of our Lord a.1554*, Fol. 18v-19r; see also fol. 49r. For an exploration of the life of the dramatist and evangelically-minded John Bale, see Peter Happé, *John Bale* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996).
By fundamentally defining themselves in opposition to an “other,” English Protestants provided little that was cohesive once the opposition faded away. It is one of the great ironies of history that the movement to free religion from the constraints, ceremony, and foreign interference inherent in Roman Catholicism began the destruction of Christian hegemony. As early as 1538, Henry was forced to contend with the issues inherent in having a vernacular Bible available to the masses, and discouraged debate, or discussion, except with those licensed to preach and recognized as learned men. Obviously, a royal proclamation against reading a widely available text was of little use, and Henry failed to dam the waters of Reformation despite efforts to define the scope of debates and the location where religious debates could take place.\(^{181}\) The Lutheran notion of “Every man his own priest” frees each man to make religious decisions for himself: including the choice to hold heretical, deistic, or even atheistic beliefs.

The contention between having allowing person access to the Bible, and thus freedom of interpretation, is what resulted in the need for a book of common prayer. As reformers removed ceremonies and Catholic elements from the church, the population of England increasingly looked to the vernacular books to discover the right beliefs and modes of worship. The Bible, however, is occasionally contradictory, full of parables, was written by and for a people and society far removed in time and space from England. The epistles of Paul, which provide some liturgical and doctrinal structure, were written to specific communities and in response to certain questions or crises. The lack of consistency within the book, and the various ways of reading it, resulted in a plethora of different interpretations. For the sake of cohesion within the English Church, Reformers

needed to dictate the proper mode of worship; and forcing such homogeneity can only be undertaken in opposition to the notion that every person is equally capable of reading and interpreting the Bible for his or her self.

Attempting to describe the religion of a person, let alone an entire community of people, is notoriously difficult. Despite its often public rituals and processions, religious faith is an intensely private matter, designed to give one comfort and meaning even at, perhaps especially at, the darkest times. The issue that this freedom creates is a lack of control over religious thought: a realm in which the Catholics, happy to adopt preexisting ceremonies, demand no more than outward conformity, and thus exert social control, cared little. Before the Reformation, these ceremonies were the backbone of religion. It is only in the aftermath of the upheavals of the 16th century that personal systems of belief becomes important in shaping society.

The assault on ceremony and symbolism undermined the aspects of social conformity that had been so important to Christianity before the Reformation. Creeping to the cross not only encouraged adoration of the deity, or at least an image representing Him, but the higher members of the church went first, followed by the aristocracy and gentry, with the lowest members of society being the last to offer their supplication. In an overwhelmingly hierarchical society, this preferential treatment was not only normal, but comfortable, making such actions “important reflections and reinforcements of the social hierarchy”.182

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

This work has shown the development of conceptions of the cross, beginning in the pre-Christian era, and evolved extensively over the coming centuries. In England, no less than elsewhere, traditions of worship are long, and Christianity is a relative newcomer. Pre-Christian England was not populated by a faithless people with no concept of religion; blank slates upon whom missionaries could readily impress Christianity. On the contrary, when proselytizers first arrived they found a people with a complex system of mythologies, symbols, and religious rituals well suited to the uncertain existence and agrarian lifestyle that they were living. Evangelists of the new faith recognized the value in modifying existing beliefs rather than imposing a brand new system, and, as a result, they did not seek to destroy previous truths, but subsume them. Those who lived in England had been revering gods and the cosmos, fearing and respecting the influence of spirits, and marking and protecting their bodies and property with symbols for thousands of years, all of which were compatible with Christianity. As a result, rather than dismantling the extant methods of religious worship, missionaries adapted pagan cosmologies to fit with Christianity.

They were vastly aided in this endeavor by the fact the cross was already a well-known and widely-used magical symbol. From the agricultural world to the astronomical, English men and women regarded the cross as having connections to numerous natural phenomena, which resulted in a multiplicity of uses. Thus, when proselytizers brought Christianity across the channel in the seventh century, bearing the cross yet expanding upon its significance, they found a receptive population. The cross, as the principal sign of Christianity, provided missionaries with a opportunity to access the religious life of
potential converts, and draw direct connections between paganism and the new faith. The simplicity, pre-existence, and ubiquity of the cross in proto-England meant that the population saw Christianity, with the cross as its principal sign, as new, yet appealingly familiar. For the English population, then, the arrival of Christianity did not entail a clean break with the past, but rather precipitated further development and reinterpretation of existing modes of worship, venues, and symbols.

Proselytizers transformed pagan sites of worship into churches, adapted pre-existing holidays to celebrate milestones in the life of Jesus, and elevated the importance of the cross, redefining its power as deriving from the Christian God. The cross, though important and powerful in pre-Christian thought, was given new eminence as the sign of salvation, the expression of God’s love, and the most potent of magical symbols. Missionaries conceded the cross’s connections to astronomy and the seasons, but used them as proof of God’s power and omnipresence. They further used local mythologies of dying and resurrecting gods, exemplified by the cyclical nature of agrarian life and the productivity of the earth, to explain the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus. Whenever possible, proselytizers stressed continuity with previous beliefs. The English, in turn, embraced Christianity, finding comfort in the idea of an omnipotent, benign God. With their religious sites, liturgical calendar, ceremonies, methods of worship, and symbolism intact, erstwhile pagans readily accepted the new faith, with little disruption to the rituals and which provided structure and meaning to their lives. This pagan-influenced version of Christianity persisted uncontested in England for centuries, with the cross at the center. Tales of the righteous King Oswald using the cross to overcome a superior force, and expansions on the its ability to heal and protect, gave the cross both increased power and
national significance. Bolstered by the work of Christian writers and theologians, the magical potentialities and exalted position of the cross in English culture continued to develop through the Crusades, right up to the Reformation. Neither its centrality in religious worship, nor its capacity for magical acts were questioned until the coming of the Lollards in the late fourteenth century.

Under the intense social and religious disruption that occurred during and after the Black Death arrived in England in 1348, the lower classes of England suffered greatly. The comfort and cohesion which the church had previously provided them had largely crumbled, with many of the clergy dying, and others fleeing their posts. Pilgrimages, prayers, and offerings continued to deprive the population of their meager funds, yet did little to stave off their misery. John Wycliffe had lived through the plague years, and witnessed first-hand the hypocrisy of the church, which did little to aid the populace directly, but continued to take their money and decorate their churches with lush tapestries, stained glass, and crosses made of silver and gold. Through his copious writings, Wycliffe sparked the religious reform movement which has come to be known as Lollardy. The Lollards sought a new form of Christianity, both beneficial to its practitioners and free from the profligacy and corruption which had come to dominate the established church.

The Lollard message was relatively simple: provide vernacular texts and education to the people, dispense with pilgrimages and images, and create a Christian community of mutual aid and assistance. For the Lollards, God’s image was not found in statues and crosses, but in men and women. Therefore, revering the former with latria, the worship intended for God alone, while wholly neglecting the latter was a corrupt and
perverted form of Christianity. Wycliffe and his followers wished for a more spartan religion, based around the scripture, education, and a community of Christian brethren. Their primary objection to crosses during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was their richness and ornamentation. As a result, Lollard doctrine called for the removal of crosses and images, especially those which were intricately carved, gilt, or studded with jewels.

Though Lollardy was not a unified doctrine, these reform-minded individuals agreed upon the detrimental effects of images, and those who did not hope for the complete removal of crosses only approved of plain wooden crosses for use in the remembrance of Jesus. Some Lollards certainly believed that crosses were idols created in opposition to the Second Commandment, but they objected more to the worship of crosses than to their creation. In response to the classic argument that images acted as books for the illiterate, Lollards argued that the proper response to aid the less educated was to expand literacy and grant access to vernacular texts, not create images.

While many English Christians responded positively to this new form of Christianity, the established church reacted to the Lollard threat with extreme persecution. Two major changes were instituted in order to combat the movement: the church redefined heresy to encompass Lollard teachings, and the state made heresy punishable by death. Over the years, the rejection of crosses, and indeed all images, became increasingly central in the movement through interactions with opponents, such as Archbishop Arundel, who used belief in the idolatry of images as a litmus test to identify heretics. Nevertheless, Lollardy was a popular movement, both in that they succeeding in attracting numerous followers, and that it was not sanctioned by the state
and existed in opposition to the commands of the church hierarchy. In order to survive, Lollardy needed to be attractive for people even in the face of hostility. Much of its appeal was likely a result of the Lollards’ desire to aid, educate, and work alongside the population in explicating religious mysteries, thus empowering them, rather than dictating beliefs. Had the Lollards waged an open war against the use of all crosses and rituals such as creeping to the cross, however, they would almost certainly have encountered the same resistance as Reformers of the sixteenth century. By focusing their teaching on the abuses of the church, the wastefulness in creating ornate objects, and the unnecessary fleecing of the population accomplished by requiring offerings and pilgrimages, the Lollards avoided the backlash that would have resulted from an attack on traditional religion. While it is possible, even likely, that the Lollard movement would have eventually coalesced into warfare against vestiges of pagan, i.e. popular, religion, its suppression by the authorities prevented it from ever fully developing such an aspect.

The Lollards truly attempted, to borrow Anne Hudson’s phrase, a premature Reformation. Many of their objections to the church and ideas for reform were adopted virtually verbatim during the sixteenth century, including their objection to rich decoration and the worship of crosses. Despite their censure, the Lollards’ ideas did not disappear from England, but continued to exist in pockets throughout the land. Lollard beliefs, particularly their condemnation of images as idolatrous, resurfaced with a vengeance during the Henrician and Edwardian Reformations.

Though he incited the break with Rome, Henry VIII remained a devout practitioner of traditional religion, replete with its ceremonies and symbols, until his death. If Henry had been able to, he would have simply supplanted the Pope as the head
of the church and dissolved the monasteries, undertaking a Reformation with no liturgical or doctrinal changes. His ministers and advisors, however, particularly Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, were eager to alter methods of worship. While Henry devoutly crept to the cross on Good Fridays, Cranmer lobbied for the removal and destruction of images, though his impulses were kept in check by the king’s conservatism. This situation changed dramatically, however, when the young, protestant-educated, and tractable 9-year-old Edward VI ascended to the throne.

Though Edward approved of Protestant reforms and allowed Archbishop Cranmer and the regent Duke of Somerset free rein to make them, his ascension did not usher in an era of unmediated change. These men were careful to proceed in a measured fashion, slowly rolling out reforms to lessen the chances of any potential backlash. As the Prayerbook Rebellion of 1549 indicates, the population was not uniformly in favor of the changes that reformers were instituting. Nevertheless, through preaching, persistence, and proper instruction via the new Catechismvs, they succeeded in convincing a fair proportion of the population, especially the younger generation, that crosses were idolatrous images, not a central component of the Christian faith. The result of this teaching were successive waves of iconoclasm, which destroyed an incredible amount of statues, carvings, and artwork. Among the victims were crosses large and small, from richly gilt altar crosses to intricately carved roods.

Tracing the development of perceptions of the cross across the first thousand years of Christian England’s history provides a useful perspective on the course of the Reformation. First, understanding the centrality of the cross in both daily life and religious imagination helps to explicate the passions that it engendered, on both sides,
during the sixteenth century. Though iconoclasm was present in the course of other European Reformations, nowhere was it as vehement and persistent as it was in England.

Second, by doing so we can see how the approach that missionaries took in converting the English population, their use of the cross and pagan rituals to minimize the disruption of the new faith to daily life, and thereby obtain eager converts, is mirrored in different, but equally interesting, ways by reformers. Finally, the persistence of the cross and ritual in English life speaks to the purpose of religion, and naturally limited both the pace of the Reformation, and the extent to which it could go.

Iconoclasts attempted to eradicate the cross from the English religious landscape in its entirety, and they achieved a great deal of, though not complete, success. While the attempts to extirpate religious symbolism and potential idols were more successful than modern historians might hope, the attacks also failed in some crucial ways. The more zealous might have been willing to completely efface the cross from England by burning roods, melting processional crosses, smashing windows, and breaking stones, but that was not the path that the England would travel. The state, and the trappings of secular authority, were virtually immune from the efforts to eradicate the cross from England. As reformers pulled down roods in churches, they would occasionally replace them with the royal arms which, ironically, featured the cross. One might wonder whether this fact was lost on the parishioners. While it may have indicated a genuine desire to embrace the monarch as the head of the church, it could also have been a way to obfuscate a continued adoration of the cross. Though the cross was not the primary aspect of the royal arms, there was nothing that could prevent a worshiper from concentrating on the cross, rather than the arms as a whole. Conservatives could adhere to outward conformity in all
regards, without abandoning the integrity of their faith. This also could have allowed for a compromise between Reformers and conservatives, by adhering to both the word and the spirit of the Reformation, but allowing an out for conservatives.

Whatever the case, there is also something significant in that act itself: they pulled down something entirely religious, and replaced it with something secular. They were literally replacing the quintessential sign of Jesus with the symbol of the monarchy.

While changes were being made to the modes of worship around the same time, the basic function of churches remained the same, and the royal arms were now the most visible iconography at the front of the church. Worship, singing, and praying were being conducted under the watchful eye of monarchy. With this substitution, one cannot help but wonder about the psychological impact of replacing Jesus with the king. To what extent were the prayers, reverence, and latria previously directed at the cross and God now directed towards the monarch? While the King became the head of the church of England, onetime images of religious worship were intentionally adopted as images of secular worship. In becoming head of the church, the English monarch could now exert control over the religious hierarchy – priests, deacons, and bishops - and turn its functioning to the benefit of the state. The centralization of church organization was mirrored by the centralization of the ritual and symbolic power of the church.

While the royal arms may have been the most commonly used symbol of the monarchy, it was not the only one, nor was it the only one that continued to use the cross. The royal crown, which as both a sign and a word is synonymous with the secular ruler, prominently featured a cross on the top of it. Kings and queens did not appear to their subjects except wearing the crown, meaning that subjects did not see them without also
seeing the cross. Additionally, except for Edward VI’s shilling, the royal arms appeared on every coin in the realm with the cross intact from the time of the Norman invasion through the reign of Elizabeth, right up until it was removed from the representation on the coins during the reign of James I. Even under Edward, the cross featured prominently on the coins, not only in the royal arms, but on the crown and on the *globus cruciger* which Edward holds in his hand (see Fig. 3).

That coins would continue to feature this prominent religious symbol leads to a fascinating reinterpretation of the biblical passage on Jesus and taxes. Asked if it is right to give money to Ceasar, Jesus asks “whose image and inscription” is on the coin. When the inquisitors correctly reply that it is Caesar’s, Jesus tell them to “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” With the cross largely removed from churches, but still present on the coinage, the crown, and the royal arms, one may rightly wonder whether there was a distinction between what was Caesar’s and what was God’s. The monarchy now controlled both the secular and religious worlds. Nor were the royal arms the only trappings of secular authority which were immune from the purge.

From the earliest time of Christianity in England, political figures sought to leverage the power of Christianity for their own exaltation. This was the meaning behind the story of Oswald erecting a cross at Heavenfield, and it remained the driving force keeping the cross prominently featured on the crown, royal arms, and coinage of Edward VI. Linking kingship with God’s favor was a means of establishing, maintaining, and enhancing

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power and popularity, but the Reformation made the connection much deeper. Oswald was a Christian king with a privileged place within the church and a significant relationship to the cross. Edward was a Christian king, but established as the head of the church, and exercised control of the cross. Clearly, the dynamics between religion and the state changed dramatically.

While crosses in religious contexts were being questioned and destroyed throughout England, the monarchy was increasingly the one realm where they continued to exist without controversy. In the coming years, this connection developed into the Divine Right of Kings, but at the time, it was merely an association. Increasingly, the reverence that the English population used to have for the cross could only be directed
towards symbols of the king. While bowing to, worshiping, or crawling towards images was unacceptable and idolatrous, bowing and crawling towards the monarch or the associated symbols was expected and apposite.

The association of royalty with religious ritual and symbolism was reinforced through other social events as well, perhaps none so prominently as the healing of scrofula through the royal touch. Scrofula, known today as tubercular adenitis, was a common disease in early modern England. It is a bacterium easily acquired through the consumption of unpasteurized milk. These bacteria affects the lymph nodes, and symptoms include painful, disfiguring abscesses on the face and neck.185 There was no known cure or treatment for the disease, and the only treatment considered effective was the royal touch.

Healing scrofula through the royal touch had its roots in 11th century France, but was prominently used by the Plantagenets in England. While it became less common during the late medieval period there, it was revived to a large extent during the time of Henry VII. Afterwards, the ceremony continued to be performed by the rest of the Tudors, and became even more widespread under the Stuarts. Those infected who were fortunate enough to make the trip to London would be drawn into an elaborate ceremony in a richly furnished environment, take in the illustrious presence of the king or queen, be prayed over, touched, and crossed by the monarch, and then receive an extremely valuable souvenir.

The process of receiving the royal touch outlasted, and to a large extent replaced, pilgrimages, but entailed many of the same ceremonial aspects. A person infected with

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scrofula would receive a letter from their local minister confirming that they did, in fact, have the disease. They would then be required to travel to London for the ceremony, which most commonly took place around Easter, but often on feast days or, occasionally, on a normal sabbath. At the appointed time, the infected person was taken before the monarch, who had been purified through fasting, communion and prayer, for the blessing. Amidst a ceremony replete with prayers and the reading of scripture, the king or queen would place both hands on the supplicants’ sores. Crucially, the ceremony was not complete until the monarch made the sign of the cross over the afflicted. The king or queen, as the only individual capable of effecting such religious healing, was exclusively able to harness the power of God through the cross, securely linking the monarchy with religious power.

Once the monarch had healed the sick, the latter was granted a gold medal threaded on a white ribbon, certifying that he or she had received healing via the royal touch, and could return home. While it is likely that Henry VII reintroduced the royal touch in order to buttress his authority and claim to the throne, since it was an expression of God’s favor, the ceremony emerged from the Reformation unscathed. Despite the attacks on ritual, symbolism, and the magical elements of Christianity during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward, it was Elizabeth who eliminated all references to the saints and Virgin Mary from the liturgy of the ceremony. Further, it was not until the 17th century that James I removed the *crux exemplata*, which was in keeping with the more widespread movement against that gesture during his reign.  

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The survival of this practice demonstrates that religious ceremony and symbols were permissible, and magic was still considered efficacious, as long as it was strictly controlled by the monarchy. Cranmer’s propagandists, such as William Gray, declared pilgrimages for healing absurd in the mid-16th century, but the only significant way the royal touch differed from a pilgrimage was that it was conducted through the state, and increased the king’s power and authority, rather than directing adoration (and money) towards saints, relics, or the independent church. Though a relatively minor, and seemingly preposterous, distinction by the standards of today, keeping such a ritual practice alive fulfilled an important role in early Modern England.

As the continuation of forbidden rituals such as creeping to the cross attests, the population of England was not willing to surrender all ceremonial aspects of their former religion and rely solely on scripture and prayer. The royal touch provided continuity with the past, albeit in a very special case, which was important for the relatively large portion of the population who had been upset with the innovations of the Reformation yet either became resigned to the course, or did not object strongly enough to openly rebel. That Easter was the most common time for such ceremonies and pseudo-pilgrimages reinforced its importance during the liturgical year, and helped replace rituals like creeping to the cross. Tellingly, the entire ceremony would take place under the cross, physically on the crown and royal arms, conceptually through the signing of the cross with the fingers, and abstractly through the biblical texts and healing from God, via the monarch. The cross had by no means disappeared from England; it had merely been subsumed into the power of the crown.

I. H., 1604) and Robert Parker, *Scholasticall Discourse against symbolizing with Antichrist in Ceremonies, Especially in the Signe of the Crosse*, (np: 1607).
Cranmer and the secular authorities recognized that the cross contained a great deal of power for the population. If the cross was not perceived as so powerful, there would not have been such an impulse to destroy it. Its mere presence was a threat to proper modes of worship and understanding of the Bible. The long traditions of glorification, the cross’s omnipresence in the Christian landscape, its panoply of uses, and the associations with magic, paganism, and (perhaps most damningly) the Pope, mean that the cross could never be purified of its religious contamination. As long as crosses continued to exist, there would be those who would seek to worship it, bow to it, and make offerings to it, as well as use it for other, more magical or potentially nefarious purposes.

While, religiously, the cross was unsalvageable in the eyes of radical reformers, the secular authorities recognized the potential inherent within such a potent symbol. By controlling the uses of the cross, rather than completely eliminating it, the crown harvested the population’s reverence for secular purposes. As the cross disappeared from daily life, it remained a highly visible symbol of the monarchy. Had the cross truly been eradicated from the religious and quotidian, the older generation could have transferred their reverence for the cross to the monarch. The younger generation, who would have never lived in a world surrounded by the cross, would have held the crown and the cross to be synonymous. The royals, by subsuming the power of the cross, would have achieved complete dominance: over the cross, over the papacy, over magic, and over the religious lives of their subjects. When they already controlled the secular, this would have made their power truly absolute.
Much of what the Reformers were arguing against were deeply ingrained ideas of symbolism, religion, and ritual. That pre-Reformation Christianity was a religion based on works was largely responsible for its success, and helps explain resistance to proposed changes. Symbols and rituals tend to be more universal for a society than beliefs. Beliefs are inherently personal and private, which makes them extremely variable even within small communities. Rituals and symbols, on the other hand, provide structure to worship, drawing the community together in shared modes of religious expression. When the entire community came together to creep to the cross on Easter, or beat the bounds at Rogantide, or process around the churchyard on Saints’ days, they truly became a community through the shared ritual. Those who did not participate in such activities were inherently suspect, since they did not participate in the foundational activities of the community. The unifying power of ritual can be extended to symbols as well, which exist both within, and independently from, ritual activities.

Crosses, whether as crucifixes, Greek crosses, or tau-crosses, were the sign of Christianity in Early Modern England, and England was a Christian nation. Whatever a cross meant to an individual, be it a charm to chase away demons, a reminder of the sacrifice of Jesus, or a token to ensure safe travels, the very act of displaying, wearing, or showing reverence for it established that individual as a part of the Christian brotherhood. There was already a universal understanding of what the symbol meant: it meant that one belonged in society and to the Christian God. To strictly fix the meaning would be to strip it of its universality; to eliminate it completely was to fracture the society. It is little

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wonder that large segments of the population were so resistant to the changes of the
1530s and 40s.

The death of King Edward ended the period of radical Reformation in England. The subsequent, and relatively brief, reign of Mary temporarily reversed iconoclastic impulses, bringing Catholic arguments again into prominence. This resurgence was short-lived, providing neither the constancy nor the duration to exact a true reversal after years of confusion, punctuated by fierce anti-papal diatribes from pulpits across England. Such stability would be achieved in the subsequent Elizabethan period, though, which again returned the nation to Protestantism.

After the reign of Elizabeth, there was no real threat of a return to Roman Catholicism. By the time that James I ascended to the throne of England, Elizabeth had been advancing a protestant agenda for nearly half a century. Those among the population who had welcomed the Marian return to Catholicism were now elderly and few, protestant propaganda and the sustained repression of Catholics under Elizabeth had the desired effect.¹⁸⁸ The Virgin Queen had replaced the Virgin Mary as an object of adoration, and rituals and the cross were mostly under the dominion of the crown. Cranmer had been aware of the need to advance the Reformation at a measured pace, and the long reign of Elizabeth made that a reality, by allowing time for the Reformation to take hold. By the ascension of James I, churches had been mostly stripped of their iconography, and in those places where crosses still existed, such as the Cheapside cross,

were mostly used as representations of the monarchy, and therefore the secular control of the church.¹⁸⁹

Of the Tudors, perhaps Elizabeth understood the power of community worship best: she insisted on religious conformity, not homodoxy. Though she continued the Reformation of her father and brother, she was less concerned with actually changing beliefs than with changing outward modes of religious expression. Elizabeth, much like her father Henry, was driven by political exigencies, and wished for cohesion and stabilization in the realm. Rather than demand her subjects become protestant in all regards, she merely asked for outward conformity, famously having no desire to make “windows into men’s souls.” As for her own personal beliefs, Elizabeth took the middle road, publicly condoning the destruction of images, but widely known to keep a silver cross in her private chapel, a point of consternation for iconoclasts and an occasional target for their destructive impulses.¹⁹⁰ And though Elizabeth kept a cross for her own personal devotion, she did not allow her subjects the same consolation, but carefully constrained the use of symbols and religious rites.

Controlling rituals and symbols had important consequences for the population of England. If indeed “[r]itualization is first and foremost a strategy for the construction of certain types of power relationships effective within particular social organizations,” it had been separate from the political or secular power of the monarchy. As the Reformation progressed, religion and its associated acts were increasingly controlled by the crown, and the previously discrete spheres of “symbolic power” embodied by “ritual


and ideology” and the “secular power” as exerted by the state system.\footnote{Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, 197} This power was not just over the approval of certain ceremonies, such as the royal touch, and the rejection of others, such as creeping to the cross, but the mere fact that the state could, and did, dictate how communities expressed their internal power structures. In the subsequent centuries, however, once the fervor of the Reformation had subsided, crosses again became prominent expressions of Christian faith, a testament to the cross’s enduring power.

The political component of the Reformation was inherent in religious developments during the Henrician period, which was primarily a political undertaking to allow Henry more sovereignty over the internal affairs of his kingdom (and marriages). But the goals of men such as Cranmer were far more concerned with separating symbols and rituals from their “mystical-tribal” meanings. Though the process was by no means completed in the sixteenth century, and is not completed even in the current day, this religious aspect of the Reformation was a success. Rather than inviting magical transformations or healing, “Ritual is now more likely to be seen a medium of emotional, intuitive expression that is able to express spiritual states, alternative realities, and the incipient connectedness in which individuals and communities are embedded.”\footnote{Catherine Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 257} Ritual and symbols continue to bind communities together, but through shared modes of expression and a communication of connection: a building with a cross is easily recognized as a church. Additionally, churches remain at the heart of many communities, since a person looking for a system of social support, friendship, or a sense of belonging can typically find it within a church. Though some restrictions may apply to those not
fully accepted into such an organization, belief is not a prerequisite for attending most church services. Most anyone can walk into a church on a Sunday morning to participate in the songs, chants, and rituals that draw that community together. The cross remains a potent symbol of Christian fellowship.

This study has attempted to shed some light on the religious beliefs and practices of English men and women during the late medieval and early modern periods. It is, of course, by no means exhaustive, but will hopefully inspire future avenues of study. The natural progression of this work would be to compare the use of the cross, and the subsequent developments of Christianity, to other areas. As previously noted, Christians did not generally violently or forcibly convert populations to their faith, but adapted existing cosmologies and rituals. How did conversion methods in other countries, such as France, Germany or Spain, compare those in England, and what traditions or symbols did Christian missionaries leverage in order to stress a continuation with the past? What subsequent impact did that have on the Reformations that occurred, or failed to occur, in those countries? How did Christian missionaries use this same approach in the post-Reformation world, and was that impacted by their countries of origin? Did other countries, both Catholic and newly protestant, have similar impulses to turn powerful magical and religious iconography to the service of the state? How did changing art forms and depictions of the crucifixion, especially the closer focus on a personal and suffering Jesus, impact perceptions of the cross? Additionally, one might use this study to inform inquiries into post-Reformation England. Did the plural reformations, the

193 The work of Susan Juster has made recent forays into this area, see Susan Juster. "Planting the “great Cross”: The Life, and Death, of Crosses in English America" The William and Mary Quarterly 74, no. 2 (2017): 241-70.
resistances against them, and the vestiges of paganism help open the door to increased secularization in England? How did religious iconography and ritual factor into the conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century, and how were they manipulated in service to the state and/or competing factions? What role did the process of state adoption of religious hierarchy and symbolism play in subsequent pathways of industrialization and globalization?

The cross has a long and complicated history, and it remains the identifying symbol of the Christian faith, Protestant and Catholic alike, despite internal attacks on it, and the accusations of idolatry against those who would display it. Few modern people, however, would credit the symbol itself with mystical powers, the ability to heal the sick, or to drive away demons. Yet, for millions of Christians, the image has lost none of its potency. While reformers may have hoped for a religion based on word and intellectual analysis, such intangibles can hardly provide relief for suffering, or inspiration during times of trial.

The centrality of the cross in English Christianity makes it uniquely able to illustrate the power of symbols and rituals. As such, the persistence of the cross in England, from the pre-Christian roots, its centrality in life after the arrival of Christian missionaries, and the intense passions, both for it and against it, during the time of the Lollards and the Reformation speak to the importance of the ceremonial in human existence. Symbols provide cohesion and an expression of shared belief, and rituals draw people together into a community and help to mark the passage of time or special occasions. Even as reformers waged a war against such symbols and rituals, they sought
to either adopt them, or replace them with others, more suited to the increasingly secular world of the sixteenth century.

In many ways, the actions of the state reflected what the original Christians in England did. Just as missionaries in seventh century England realized that the cross was a familiar, magical symbol for the people and leveraged it as a means of proselytizing a new faith, the state of the sixteenth century understood the power and importance of the cross, and transformed it into a tool for the monarchy. Early Christians did not destroy pagan worship sites, but removed the idols and transformed them into Christian churches. Reformers did not destroy churches, but they threw down the idolatrous images, and replaced them with symbols of the king. In nearly every case, reformers, including the Lollards, did not abolish something without attempting to replace it. When crosses were taken down, either the royal arms or written biblical passages replaced them: thus as images were condemned, texts and the monarchy were exalted. Lollards condemned the veneration of God through saints, relics, and carvings, but wished to substitute veneration of God in man. Reformers abolished pilgrimages to relics for healing, but pilgrimages to receive healing from the king or queen persisted. When reformers challenged fundamental religiosity, the population balked, but when they provided adequate replacements for the eradicated elements, the populace was considerably mollified. Even in the face of religious revolution, symbols, ritual, and religious activities persisted, albeit in new guises. Traditional notions of the magic of the cross have been largely overturned, but the magic did not entirely disappear.

To have a physical representation, a symbol to outwardly proclaim one’s faith, to clutch to one’s breast during struggles, or to look upon in earnest contemplation and
renew one’s faith is a powerful magic indeed. While today we draw sharp distinctions between religion and magic, this was not always the case. Understanding the rituals and magical heritage from which a religion descends should not denigrate it, but heighten the regard in which it is held. The 16th century was clearly a time of great religious perplexity for the English. Their sustaining rituals, beliefs, images, and mythologies were under attack from forces both within Europe and from the continent. Texts written in the vernacular from both sides of the debate were being printed abroad and at home, persecuted Protestants fled to havens in Germany and London, and Catholics flowed in opposite directions. Men such as Tyndale helped to disseminate Lutheran ideas in England, and the heretical ideas of John Wycliffe had never truly been eradicated. The general trend of the Reformation era was towards the creation of an arguably more “pure” and scripture-based religion, free of popish “superstition.” Ironically, the Reformation backfired. While reformers such as Luther, Calvin, and Knox pressed for a uniformly devout, text-based religion, what they achieved was a fractured society. Disagreements among the Reformers about images and the Eucharist, new interpretations of biblical texts, and splinter religious groups helped to create cracks in the Christian foundations of society.

Rather than strict adherents to biblical Christianity, the ensuing decades and centuries of conflict resulted in increased toleration, and eventually secularization. Distinctions between Protestant denominations became less socially and culturally important. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even deism and atheism were not uncommon, if not necessarily accepted.194 And across these years, religious imagery,

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194 Even today, especially in the United States, atheism is largely not an accepted set of religious beliefs. Numerous studies in the fields of psychology and sociology have shown atheists are more often distrusted
statues of Mary and Jesus, crosses, and crucifixes were reintroduced. Few now would contend that wearing or displaying a cross is a certain path to damnation, and fewer within the faith still actively seek to destroy Christian imagery. Understandings of what is important in religious life continue to shift, as Christianity evolves to meet the needs of its adherents. Christianity has proven to be a resilient force, providing adherents with structure, community, and meaning to different degrees at different times. Withstanding attacks both internal and external, and adapting to meet these challenges, the evolution of Christianity has allowed it to not merely survive, but thrive.

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