
BURNING TO READ

*English Fundamentalism and
Its Reformation Opponents*




JAMES SIMPSON

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Introduction

 SOMETIME IN 1971, at the age of about seventeen, I received an intellectual shock. In my final year at a Presbyterian boys' school in Melbourne, Australia, I chose a history course entitled "Renaissance and Reformation." We had a superb teacher, Mr. David Paul, but in one lesson I felt sure he'd got things wrong. He told us that Luther believed that works were utterly useless, and that Catholics, by contrast, believed that works had real purchase on God's decisions about us. This, I felt quite certain, had to be an error.

I had grown up in a minimally religious culture. Religion for me was more a social division of sorts, especially between Catholics and Protestants. I had many Jewish friends from school, but Catholics were beyond my ken; they went to different schools. In this environment, where religion played very little explicit role, I wasn't so worried about salvation. But I was worried about work. Even if my benign familial environment wasn't stridently intolerant in any way, I nevertheless felt pretty certain that we (the Protestants) were quite a bit superior. After all, we were the rational ones. We were the ones who knew what work meant, and whose entire culture was grounded in the dignity of work rationally rewarded. Catholics were still a bit medieval; they were burdened by wholly superfluous, irrational guilt.

Here, however, was my admired teacher telling me that sixteenth-century Protestants felt irredeemably guilty, regarded works as the fruit of free will with derision, and believed that God's reward was a pure gift. They also believed that this divine gift was wholly a matter of God's impenetrable decision, made without regard to the efforts of humans, which were, in any case, worthless. Even more confusingly, my respected teacher was telling me that Catholics believed that, in one way or another, God did reward the human effort of works in the world. This assertion was so patently at odds with everything I'd absorbed that it just had to be wrong.

Needless to say, my teacher was right. Discovering that truth was my first confounding yet energizing experience of the paradoxes of modernity. Modernity was, I learned then and there, darker and more paradoxical than the Protestant triumphalism by which I'd been nourished had allowed.

In this book I seek to illuminate more of the dark, energizing paradoxes of Protestant modernity, with regard to a fairly tightly defined practice and period. The practice is reading; the period is 1520 or so until 1547; and the place is England. Some of the writers concerned were in exile from England, but their work was focused on the English situation.

Why a history of evangelical reading? Modernity and reading are intimately bound; the formation of one powerful strand of modernity in the sixteenth century was, in good part, produced by a profound transformation in the way Europeans read. The simplicity and primacy of the literal sense, and the right of the individual reader to read canonical books in freedom, without reference to either history or communities—both these foundations of a liberal reading culture, each underwritten by Luther's conscience-driven and courageous stance against the might of an institution, are taken to be irreversible gains of the Protestant Reformation. Individual reading

capacity, liberty, and resistance to institutional disciplines are all foundational elements of the liberal tradition's self-understanding, according to which the sixteenth-century Lutheran moment is the turning point that generates what was to become the liberal tradition.

The individual reader's freedom is so foundational, indeed, that any resistance to the idea that such freedom was a sixteenth-century gain is difficult to comprehend. Here I attempt to judge the force of these foundational claims. I also seek to understand sixteenth-century resistance to the evangelical culture of the Book, arguing that the reader's freedom is not among the gains of sixteenth-century evangelical culture. What was achieved in the sixteenth century is better characterized as the origin of fundamentalism than of the liberal tradition. Contrary to the liberal tradition's often complacent assumption that fundamentalism is reactionary and "conservative," this book will maintain that fundamentalism is a distinctively modern phenomenon, the inevitable product of newly impersonal and imperious forms of textuality, and of the application of ever fewer textual instruments to ever larger jurisdictions. Sixteenth-century resistance to fundamentalism was, by contrast, a civilized, meditated, and partially plausible alternative modernity.

In short, the liberal tradition's derivation of itself from the sixteenth-century Reformation requires careful revision. The liberal tradition damagingly traces its origin, I contend, from exactly the source that in fact produced the liberal tradition's principal enemy (that is, fundamentalism). I generate this argument not in a spirit of dismissing the liberal tradition (far from it), but rather in an attempt to provoke the liberal tradition to understand itself better and redraw its own genealogy.

Why so short a time frame and such a narrowly defined geographic limit? Revolutions do not produce great literature, since the

revolutionary moment actively eschews the indirections of literature. That moment can, however, produce great thought. The initial shock of proposed change tends, in fact, to produce clearer thought in powerful minds than does the secondary phase of the revolution. The clearer, more illuminating positions are the privilege of a moment that precedes the formation of entrenched party lines. That moment also precedes the formation of the revolution's material institutions, with their attendant disciplines. This clarity and prescience of thought were evident in early sixteenth-century England, where the first shock of the Reformation produced two writers, William Tyndale and Thomas More, who articulated exemplary accounts of two compelling, but exclusive and entirely non-negotiable, reading cultures. This period of powerful and prescient reflection occurred in the years between 1520 (the importation of Lutheran theology into England) and 1547, when the death of Henry VIII opened the entirely new situation of an unequivocally Protestant king.

Chapter 1 sketches the history of two hundred years of Biblical violence in Europe. In Chapter 2 I retell the stirring narrative of how the evangelical Bible was heroically produced and disseminated under conditions of extreme danger. The rest of the chapters devoted to evangelical reading practice tell a different, less familiar story: each of them explores the dark and powerful paradoxes of reading and modernity that took shape in the early sixteenth century.

Chapter 3 examines a doctrine of salvation (or soteriology)¹ that makes peculiar demands on readers who want to be saved by their reading: such readers had better hate texts before they love them. Reading promises the truth about one's salvation, but that promise can only be arrived at through detestation of oneself and the text. God's law is found in Scripture and Scripture alone; however, the point of that written law is to insist on the reader's inability to fulfill it. Because human will and reason are irredeemably abject, in a Lu-

theran scheme, Biblical injunction hovers over an abyss: apparently it says "do this," but in reality it says "know that this cannot be done."

A second paradox underlies the first: evangelical reading repudiates ambiguity in its affirmation of scriptural clarity; but evangelical reading practice derives in the first place from, and only from, the recognition of verbal ambiguity.

A third paradox surfaces as well in Chapter 3: that the evangelical "faith alone" culture turns out to manifest all the signs of a "no faith" culture. A theological culture of "faith alone" that insists so relentlessly on the primacy of the written text is actually symptomatic of a culture in which faith is under intense pressure. One might expect a "faith alone" culture to treat written contracts with disdain, since such contracts are the textual instruments of those who do *not* trust each other. Evangelical culture, however, simultaneously proclaims faith alone, and yet insists that it all be written, in covenant, in black and white.

Chapter 4 explores a number of paradoxes, all dark. A reading culture with an extreme emphasis on the simplicity and legibility of the literal sense ends up producing its opposite: an extremely authoritarian account of the institutional element in reading. Such insistence on the simplicity of Scripture produces an unreadable text written in the heart of the elect. Reading might be for everyone, but predestination certainly isn't.² The only "good" readers of Scripture are predestined readers, readers who already belong, before they start reading, to a very select and exclusive institution. What's more, predestination turns the whole world into a very complex text, full of signs and portents by which one descries the divine decision. Thus, extreme emphasis on the simple text produces very complex, not to say unreadable, texts. Claims about pure transparency produce near total opacity.

Chapter 5 illuminates the darkness of Protestant culture with re-

gard to the paradox of personal relations: the exaggerated emphasis on the wholly accessible and incontrovertible literal sense produces private and fragmented, if not paranoid, reading experiences. Here I focus especially on sixteenth-century reception of the Psalms. In Chapter 6 I examine another dark paradox, that of a reading culture that prizes historical integrity in so relentless a way as to produce a hollowing out and repudiation of history.

Across these chapters I present, then, an image of Biblical reading as unsettlingly recessive, always moving back across a horizon as one approaches it. In this I offer a parallel with Max Weber's arguments about Protestantism and work/s. The paradox that a theology so hostile to works should have produced a work ethic was solved by Weber in 1904: even if Lutheran (and Calvinist) works do not contribute to salvation in any way, good works are nevertheless a *sign* of God's election. Works, then, despite their uselessness as currency, become valuable as signs of a gift already bestowed. If Protestants did indeed work harder and idealize work, it was not because works had gained in theological value; it was rather because works had become a semiotic field that one must scrutinize for signs of divine approval. The uncertainty and necessity of the search produced the neurotic commitment to keep working until such a sign demonstrably appeared. A Protestant worked, and worked all the harder, precisely *because* works had become useless as currency and useful as signs.³

The same logic applies to the "work" of reading: because reading is itself a work, and because the works promoted by reading are, already, irredeemably useless, reading becomes necessary as a field of scrutiny, but useless as a field of directive action. One reads, to replay the paradox, and one reads all the more intensely, precisely because reading has *lost* its purchase on the world of action.

The substance of the book consists of scholarship, but its structure is shaped as an essay: it's impossible, in dealing with such fundamen-

tal issues, not to take sides. Given that the Protestant case has held near-absolute sway for so long, I attempt to right the balance a little. The book's structure reflects my attempt to understand the truly shocking reality of Protestant reading and, in part, of Protestant modernity.

In Chapter 7 I deepen the debate by examining the position of Thomas More, who also understood the shocking reality of Protestant reading. I present More's position not as a rearguard action, but rather as a plausible alternative to sixteenth-century Protestant textual modernity.⁴

Despite this partiality, I have made every effort not to be untrue to the materials. Partiality is, however, at least provisionally necessary: misunderstanding of sixteenth-century reading and its historical effects is pervasive and of long standing; the consequences of that misunderstanding are far-reaching and ongoing. What's needed now are clearly targeted studies delineating the conceptual issues and stakes of sixteenth-century cultures that have been deeply misunderstood. Such clarity of understanding is urgent at this point in the history of Western societies, as Biblical fundamentalism holds the institutions of liberal society and liberal scholarship in contempt. As long as liberals claim their descent from the very tradition that most threatens them, they are vulnerable.

Partiality does, however, have its limits. In the final chapter I step back from antagonism and describe the confrontation rather as a tragic one, in which each side is inevitably and profoundly compromised by an encounter it cannot avoid. Here I focus on the helpless and tragic transformation of the pluriform, Catholic More into his literalist enemy. We gain only a certain amount by rehearsing the agon of the Reformation; we gain more by recognizing that the agon is our own history as well, and that we can no more step onto one side or the other than travel in time. We cannot travel across tempo-

ral boundaries into the safe territory of the past, since we are ourselves the products of our whole past.⁵ We are at the same time part of the problem, and part of the way forward.


Why are these matters so resonant now? Religion as a category is, happily, subject to a powerful revisionism in the academy. Few now argue from confident Enlightenment condescension to religion, as if religion can be treated as a mere allegorical reflex of, or code for, the "true" reality (usually politics or economics). Instead, the secularity of what appear to be purely secular phenomena in Western culture is increasingly seen in silent dialogue with its repressed religious counterpart. Religion is now the central arena in which all the big questions are examined: narratives of national identity and freedom; of individual liberties; of the history of scholarship; and of subjectivity. Although all of these narratives (and more) were until recently constructed from purely secular materials, each now requires an understanding of the history of religious experience.


If a powerful revisionism of religion is under way across the academy, there can be no doubt about religion's profile in the "real world": fundamentalist reading practices are, for example, becoming a legislated norm or at least a desideratum in some democratic states, while from afar (and occasionally from not so far) we distinctly hear the sounds and cries, not of the political revolutionary's, but of the religious fundamentalist's bombs. Reading and its consequences are once again becoming capable of violently changing the world. We ignore understanding our religious history, and particularly the history of religious reading, at our own peril. No attempt is made here to persuade the fundamentalist of the error of literalist reading, which, given the nature of fundamentalist conviction, is a lost cause. The book does aim at the more modest goal of setting into profile the grounds of such a reading culture and its inevitably violent results.

Some practical matters: I consistently use the word "evangelical" in

this book, for want of a better term, to designate "Protestant" culture. I do so partly because the word "Protestant" is not used by any of the writers I study, and was not in use anywhere until the Holy Roman Emperor's Diet in Speyer in 1529. The word "evangelical," by contrast, would have been recognized by any of the writers treated here as signaling a set of sympathies. I imply no necessary connection with the specific sense of the word "evangelical" in contemporary religious usage, particularly in the United States.⁶ I beg indulgence for the philologically unauthorized word "fundamentalism" in my subtitle: this word is of American origin and derives from early twentieth-century usage. The word does nevertheless designate a movement based on the literal inerrancy of Scripture; and many forms of that movement are vibrant in many parts of the world today. My use of the word in one high-profile place is designed to connect sixteenth-century debates with contemporary issues, a connection that will, I hope, be accepted by the time readers have finished the book.⁷

Two Hundred Years of Biblical Violence

 BOOKS can unleash terrific energies. In this chapter I sketch some of the ways in which new forms of Bible reading produced nearly two hundred years of violence in western Europe between 1517 and 1700. I also look at the historiographical tradition in which that release of extraordinary energies has been almost universally admired.

 The reign of Josiah, king of Judah (640–609 BCE), as related in the Second Book of Kings, reveals the vital yet destructive energy that books can unleash. Josiah's father, Manasseh, had so angered the God of Israel with idolatry that God threatened to annihilate Jerusalem itself: "And I will wipe out Jerusalem, as a man would wipe a dish, and when he hath wiped it turneth it upside down" (2 Kings 21:13). God nevertheless promises to leave a remnant of the faithful, which, happily, includes the boy king Josiah, who comes to the throne at the tender age of eight. Once eighteen, Josiah orders the temple rebuilt; as money is given to the "carpenters and masons" for the works, a book is found by the High Priest. The reading of the book before the young king produces an immediate and energetic penitential response: he tears his clothes, and declares that "a great wrath of the

Lord . . . is kindled upon us, that our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do in all points as it is written therein" (2 Kings 22:13).

Josiah's recognition of the book's truth saves him: the prophetess Oldah predicts that Josiah will see none of the destruction soon to be visited on Jerusalem. His first public act is to read the book, himself, before a large assembly of all the men of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem; they jointly promise to "make good the words of the said appointment that were written in the foresaid book" (2 Kings 23:3). If divine violence is deferred by this communal assent to the written law, that assent now manifests itself, and manifests itself only, in a maelstrom of human violence.

No other acts are recorded in the reign of Josiah except his iconoclasm, destruction of pagan temples, and killing of the pagan priests. Josiah commands the priests to cleanse the temple of all the vessels made for Baal, which are promptly burned. He "puts down" the priests of the pagan gods, who burn "sacrifices unto Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the planets" (2 Kings 23:5); he "defile[s] the hill altars," and he sacrifices "all the priests of the hill altars," stamping the broken altars to powder and burning the groves dedicated to the foreign gods (2 Kings 23). In short, Josiah puts "out of the way" all "workers with spirits, soothsayers, images of witchcraft, idols and all other abominations" in order to "make good the words of the law which were written in the book that Helkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord" (2 Kings 23:24).

This compact narrative sets one form of authorization against another: the rediscovered written document is held to constitute the Law, mainly because it's taken to be the Word of God, and because it reawakens an ethnic historical consciousness. That written Law exercises absolute sway over the places, the idols, and the persons of any alternative religious authority.

Recognition of the written law activates other struggles as well. Architecturally, temple repair involves (pagan) temple destruction. Geographically, the Law demands a reaffirmation of geographic possession, since the list of idolatrous sites reads like a map of the land of Canaan before the victories of Joshua eight centuries earlier. The altars of the goddess Astarte, chief deity of the Sidonians to the North; of Chemosh, god of the Moabites to the Southeast; and of Milcom, god of the Ammonites to the East—these “the king defiled: and brake the images and cut down the groves and filled the places with the bones of men” (2 Kings 23:14).

In Josiah’s time the state of ancient Judah was extremely fragile: the kingdom of Israel had already fallen (c. 721 BCE), leaving only Judah threatened by Assyria, before its imminent demise by decisive Babylonian invasion and the destruction of the Temple (587 BCE). Josiah responds to this precarious situation not only by targeting the imported Assyrian religious practice, which is all the worse for having been practiced by Josiah’s immediate ancestors; he also targets worship of the gods who inhabited Canaan before the Israelite invasion. In the previous reign, Josiah’s father Manasseh had been castigated by God for reintroducing “more wickedness than did the heathen people which the Lord destroyed from before the children of Israel” (2 Kings 21:9). To practice the religion of contemporary invaders is to remind Judah of the religious practice in its territories prior to Israel’s own occupation of those lands. The rediscovered book might remind Judah of its authentic past, but it equally provokes the memory of Israel’s own long tradition of idolatry. Provisional pacification of a jealous God demands a clean, iconoclastic, xenophobic break with all examples of Israel’s recurring acceptance both of imported religion, and of Canaanite, non-Abrahamic religions.

The story of Josiah’s rediscovery of a book is an exemplary mo-

ment in the history of reading. Here reading is represented as nothing if not publicly performed ("And he [Josiah] read in the ears of them all the words of the book of the covenant" [2 Kings 23:2]), and reading is nothing if not socially oriented. Fresh recovery of a canonical book provokes a reimagination of both community and history. Those rediscoveries of indisputably authentic written law are capable of both soldering community and at the same time legitimating powerful violence against those who fall beyond the pale of the newly redefined written law.

The events of Josiah's reign were taken to have direct pertinence to mid-sixteenth-century England. William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536) was most probably the translator of the Books of Kings in the Matthew's Bible of 1537, the manuscript of which he had prepared by 1535;¹ he was also probably responsible for the marginal glosses to Kings in that edition, in which he insinuated parallels between the idolaters targeted by Josiah and his own Catholic enemies. One set of pagan priests (the Camarites) is glossed, for example, as the "black monks of Baal."² But the full force of the parallel between the reign of Josiah and events in Tudor England could only be exploited after 1547, with the accession of the child king Edward VI at the age of nine.

Evangelicals wasted no time in billing Edward as the new Josiah. The reign of Josiah not only provided the model of a boy king but also, with providential accuracy, portrayed a program of reform driven by recovery of the long-hidden Word of God. That rediscovery legitimated aggressive iconoclasm against a religion newly defined as foreign and superstitious. Further, as in the reign of Josiah, the ecclesiastical arm worked under the supervision of a king in the recovery of a national religion. In his coronation speech on 20 February 1547 (the first such speech before a monarch who did not recognize the authority of Rome), the reforming Archbishop Thomas

Cranmer (1489–1556) was quick to point out the parallelism. He directs Edward that his duty is

. . . to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed. These acts be signs of a second Josiah, who reformed the Church of God in his days. . . . It is written of Josiah in the book of the Kings thus: "Like unto him there was no king before him that turned to the Lord with all his heart, according to the law of Moses, neither after him arose there any like him."³

This is no vague exhortation but a specific, Josiah-inspired reform program: the "foreign" religion is to be banished, and its cult redefined as idolatry. These acts are grounded in recognition of the one authentic law, and inspired by the promise of renewed strength for England, for, as Tyndale had said, God "is no patcher, he cannot build on another man's foundation."⁴

Legislators enacted the Josiah program with alacrity. Already in 1547, the Royal Injunctions (directions for ecclesiastical officials), published in the name of the boy king Edward VI, moved aggressively to the offensive. They reignited the war between the recovered divine Word and the "superstitious" past of imported, foreign, nonscriptural religious practice. Injunction 28 neatly encapsulates the battle lines, by reorganizing the interiors of churches in two ways. It begins by extending iconoclastic injunctions promulgated by Henry VIII in 1538. Church officials will

. . . take away, utterly extinct and destroy all shrines, covering of shrines, all tables, candlesticks . . . pictures, paintings, and all other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition: so that there remain no memory of the same in walls, glass-windows, or elsewhere within their churches or houses.⁵

This abolition of all religious pictorial memorials, and of certain forms of memory itself, makes way for the second change to church

interiors in the same injunction: churchwardens, "at the common charge of the parishioners in every church, shall provide a comely and honest pulpit . . . for the preaching of God's word" (1:126). Thus, reading displaces images; the written, the unwritten; worship, idolatry; the national, the international; codified law, customary practice. As in all periods of new knowledge technologies, the winner reclassifies other, older technologies as outmoded, superstitious, or both.

The parallelism with Josiah remained a leitmotif of evangelical historiography. John Foxe, who makes the comparison between Edward and Josiah explicitly,⁶ begins his account of Edward's reign in his *Actes and Monuments* (1563) with Edward implicitly following in the steps of Josiah.⁷ In the upper panel of an illustration in that book we see the papists "packing away their paltrye," as the iconoclastic fires burn in the background, while in the lower panels we first see Edward distributing the Word to a respectful clergy and nobility; then the eye moves right, to the church cleansed of all images and celebrating the only two sacraments with, in the evangelical account, scriptural authority (that is, Baptism and the Eucharist) under a "comely and honest pulpit" from which that Word is preached.⁸

The energizing and violent drama of reading in the reign of Edward VI was only one scene of that same drama being enacted throughout northern Europe, from the second decade of the sixteenth century. Of course late medieval Europe had already witnessed scriptural movements that championed the authority of Scripture above "men's traditions," particularly in late fourteenth-century England and Bohemia.⁹ But only the combination of mass reproduction of books (possible from the middle of the fifteenth century), and the astonishing theological and polemic force of Martin Luther (1483–1546), could produce a Josiahian drama that would envelop Europe in more than a hundred and fifty years of violent upheaval.

In fact the mass reproduction of books itself might evoke parallels

with the century of Josiah, since, according to some scholars of the Hebrew scriptures, it was only in the seventh century BCE that the spread of literacy in ancient Judah provoked a specifically written tradition.¹⁰ Clearly the advent of the book printed with movable type in Europe (c. 1455) was prompted by increasing literacy, but the new printing method in turn hugely promoted the spread of literacy and a culture of the book.¹¹ Both seventh-century BCE Judah and sixteenth-century Europe were periods of new literacies, which championed the authority of the book above customary practice.

The Biblical account of Josiah focuses on the destruction of objects rather than the killing of people, though it does make reference to the "sacrifice" of the priests of Baal. Other accounts of the purging of idolatrous religious practices in ancient Israel are more direct in their account of murder in the name of a divinely inspired Word. King Jehu (ruled 842–815 BCE), for example, who was anointed on the orders of the prophet Elijah, is commanded in the Second Book of Kings to initiate a coup against the house of Ahab. He orders that Ahab's Sidonian wife Jezebel be thrown to her death from her upper-story window; he arranges for the beheading of the seventy sons of Ahab; and he kills everyone else associated with the idolatrous Ahab, "all that were great with him, and his companions and his priests, until he had left him naught remain" (2 Kings 10:11).

Extinguishing all traces of the reigning royal house was, however, only half the job. Jehu acts "according to the saying of the Lord which he spoke to Elijah"; to complete the task of purification, he must also eliminate Ahab's non-Abrahamic religion. He pretends he wants to make a sacrifice to Baal, and calls for "all the prophets of Baal, and all his servants and all his priests that none be lacking. For I have a great sacrifice to do to Baal" (2 Kings 10:19). The assembled devotees do not understand that they are themselves the sacrifice: they innocently enter the temple of Baal until it is filled, wall to wall,

Jehu then orders a check that no worshipper of the Lord is in the temple, before commanding the eighty men to surround the temple, on orders not to allow anyone to escape. The building having been thoroughly surrounded, Jehu orders the guards to enter and be certain to kill all within. The purging of the temple follows, with the image of Baal thoroughly broken. God approves: "Then the Lord said to Jehu: because thou hast lustily done that [what] pleaseth me . . . therefore shall thy children in the fourth generation sit on the seat of Israel" (2 Kings 10:30).

❁ This scene of exclusivist religious violence in the reign of Jehu is not driven by the discovery of a book, as in the reign of Josiah; it is instead directed by the living word of God, in the mouth of the prophet Elijah. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century western Europe north of the Alps, scenes like these were not unusual, whether inspired by prophetic voices or, as was much more common, by understandings of rediscovered Biblical truth.¹² Of course not all such scenes were inspired by religious convictions alone, and the violence was performed as much by Catholics as by Protestants, and often by one stripe of Protestant against another. However mixed the motives and the perpetrators may have been, parts of Europe witnessed between 150 and 200 years of violent upheaval, from the Lutheran challenge begun in 1517 until the mid- to late seventeenth century.

In 1524, only seven years after Luther's first public challenge to papal religion, the Peasants' War ("Europe's most massive and widespread popular uprising before the 1789 French Revolution")¹³ erupted north of the Alps in a broad, northward-moving front from Switzerland to Hungary. By Luther's account, the peasants acted under the impulse of their own understanding of the Gospel: "They cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the gospel."¹⁴ Luther's response was also Gospel-driven, and set the tone for the brutal repres-

sion. He was guided by Romans 13:1–2: “The powers that be, are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth power, resisteth the ordinance of God. And they that resist, shall receive to themselves damnation.” Luther exhorted those repressing the revolt “to smite, slay and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog.” If a man is in open rebellion, “everyone is both his judge and his executioner.”¹⁵

That revolt was the precursor of much more organized, princely warfare within the boundaries of the Habsburg Empire into the mid-sixteenth century, as different principalities sided with or against the Lutheran, and then with or against “Reformed” Protestantism, and then chose between one or another of these now-divided evangelical camps. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555 marked an important pause to the wars in German territories since 1547, with the firm establishment of the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose region, his religion), although it left the profound and bitter divisions between Lutheran and Reformed Protestantism unrecognized.¹⁶ Warfare in the German territories did not effectively end, however, until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, after thirty years of war in which between 15 and 40 percent of the population of the German lands died prematurely through either fighting, famine, or disease.¹⁷

In France the two dozen executions of evangelicals ordered by Francis I in 1534 heralded a fierce civil war that extended throughout the sixteenth century. Full-scale civil war broke out between Catholics and Huguenots in 1562. It was conducted with an “extraordinary degree of bitterness and savagery,” and reached a pause only in 1598, with the Edict of Nantes in the reign of Henry IV (1589–1610). The Edict legislated freedom for both Protestant and Catholic worship in France, and granted full civic rights to Huguenots (French Protestants). This pause was only achieved, however, after the massacre of

up to 5,000 Protestants on St. Bartholomew's Day (24 August 1572), and the effective collapse of the French state under eight separate and bloody bouts of civil war. The Edict was revoked by Louis XIV in 1685, provoking the exile of more than 400,000 Huguenots.¹⁸

In the Low Countries the situation was complicated by foreign dominion of the Habsburg Empire. The new spiritual culture had been actively persecuted by Habsburg authorities up to the end of the 1550s, but Spanish bankruptcy and the consequent need for higher taxation provoked trouble from 1557. The Habsburg army sent in 1567 executed noble leaders along with about 1,000 others; more than 100,000 people left the Netherlands in exile.¹⁹ By 1572 the Habsburg forces had been repelled, but that check was not only the prelude to the durable division of the Low Countries into a Catholic kingdom to the south (Belgium) and the evangelical United Provinces, or Netherlands, to the north. It also led to "a prolonged confrontation" between the Habsburg Empire and the Protestant powers of northern Europe, "which by the 1590s became a war on a global scale."²⁰

In England the worst period of persecution by Catholic authorities occurred in the reign of Queen Mary (1553–1558), who attempted to reverse the Josiahian revolution set in train by her evangelical half-brother. That persecution involved the burning of nearly 300 people, "numbers unprecedented in England,"²¹ but this savage repression itself heralded more of the same to come (although from different quarters), either in the Civil War of 1642–1648, or in the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland, which included, for example, the storming of Drogheda in September 1649, killing "perhaps 3000 royalist troops in hot and cold blood, [and] all the Catholic clergy and religious he [Cromwell] could identify."²²

Earlier in his career Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) had seen scriptural authority for the banishment of the king: meditation on Psalms

17 and 105 prompted him confidently to declare to Parliament that "they that are implacable and will not leave troubling the land may be speedily destroyed out of the land."²³ So too did Cromwell appeal to divine sanction in the case of his bloody invasion of Ireland, since one of his own justifications was religious: this was "a righteous judgment of God upon these barbarous wretches who have imbrued their hands in so much innocent blood."²⁴ Although Cromwell denied that he had tried to extirpate the Catholic religion from Ireland in 1650, by 1652 he might have supported the "Act of Settlement of 1652 that envisaged up to 100,000 executions, mass emigration, and ethnic cleansing on a scale unknown in western European history."²⁵ It was not until 1689, under William III, that the English parliament passed a limited toleration act, although Catholics, Jews, and Unitarians had to wait for legislation passed between 1778 and 1871 for full religious emancipation in England.

This somber and very selective litany of horrors and repressions sketches a history of western European religious violence and persecutions at which few contemporary readers will fail to shudder. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many Europeans, exhausted as they were by long bouts of internecine viciousness, themselves began to shudder, and to formulate the ground rules for religious toleration.²⁶ At the beginning of the long fight, however, those with broad perspectives regarded the struggle ahead with relish. They also approached the fight with theological justification for intolerance.²⁷ In England, the Catholic proponent Thomas More had no desire to see toleration between opposed religious camps. He is reported to have said to his son-in-law that

I pray God, that some of us, as high as we seem to sit upon the mountains treading heretics under our feet like ants, live not in the day that we gladly would wish to be at a league and composition with them, to

let them have their churches quietly to themselves, so that they would be content to let us have ours quietly to our selves.²⁸

On the evangelical side, Luther, for example, figured the position of the True Church as a Babylonian captivity, suffering the wrath of God as a result of idolatrous deviance. Near the very beginning of his polemical career, in an open letter (1520) to Pope Leo X, he defended his polemical aggression on the model of Christ's own example: "He Himself was keenly hostile to his opponents, and called them a brood of vipers, hypocrites, blind, children of the devil."²⁹ A few years later, in 1524, he rebuked Erasmus for being faint of heart before the battles of liberation ahead, and for preferring "carnal peace" above "the Word of God." "Let me tell you, therefore," he goes on,

that what I am after in this dispute is to me something serious, necessary, and indeed eternal, something of such a kind and such importance that it ought to be asserted and defended to the death, even if the whole world had not only to be thrown into strife and confusion, but actually return to chaos and reduced to nothingness.³⁰

From here Luther cites Christ himself in defense of the tumultuous reception that the Gospel must inevitably provoke: it is regularly the case, he argues, that the Word of God throws the "world in a state of tumult"; this is "plainly asserted by Christ."³¹ Among other citations, Luther invokes Matthew 10:34 ("Think not, that I am come to send peace into the earth. I came not to send peace, but a sword"), and Luke 12:49 ("I am come to send fire on the earth: and what is my desire but that it were already kindled?").

Not only is the need for Christian violence felt to be authorized by the Gospel, but the very simplicity and solidity of the text also evokes violence against its obverse: a whole world of once numinous objects that have become mere inert, oppressive things. As writers of

different persuasions describe these mere things in lists, one can feel their desire to sweep them away violently. The longer the list, indeed, the looser the syntactic grip, and the more lightweight and ersatz the objects appear to become. In his skeptical account of pilgrimage devotion, for example, Erasmus piles up a huge list of relics whose very lack of syntactic organization itself begs for an iconoclastic response. Erasmus attacks

the superstitious worship and false honor given to bones, heads, jaws, arms, stocks, stones, shirts, smocks, coats, caps, hats, shoes, miters, slippers, saddles, rings, beads, girdles, bowls, bells, books, gloves, ropes, . . . candles, boots, spurs (my breath was almost past me) with many other such damnable illusions of the devil to use them as gods contrary to the immaculate scripture of God.³²

Lists of this kind are an essential and recurrent weapon in the evangelical rhetorical arsenal. The verbal junk here could go on forever (exhausting the capacities of the breath itself): it's an infinite, jumbled, unsorted pile of rubbish, the only sane response to which is hammer and broom.³³

❁ How has cultural history received this melancholy story of religious violence?

Faced with what was registered as an oppressive, tawdry, and finally melancholy pile of things, and with what they saw as an oppressive theology of salvation, evangelical writers of the first flush of what became the Protestant revolution hailed their own movement as one of evangelical liberty. The simplicity and clarity of the text relieved them from the oppressive weight of both things and the unending rituals that promote only anxiety. Luther's early polemical titles proclaim that message of liberty: *Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen* (Concerning the Liberty of a Christian, 1520); *De Captivitate Baby-*

lonica Ecclesiae (Concerning the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520). That last work trumpets the theme of liberty that has become so powerful a strand in the historiography of Protestantism:

I lift my voice simply on behalf of this liberty and conscience, and I confidently cry: No law, whether of man or of angels, may rightfully be imposed on Christians without their consent, for we are free of all laws.³⁴

Modern readers of Luther, in light of the melancholy history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, might see the confidence of his clarion call to liberty as rash and blithely overconfident. For Luther, we recall, was prepared to have the whole world "return[ed] to chaos and reduced to nothingness."

For all that, extremely powerful traditions of Western historiography continue to see this Lutheran moment as fundamentally positive and inspiring: the liberal tradition grounds itself in Luther's defiance as an individual against the power and threat of an institution. In the estimation of Herbert Butterfield, for example, Luther was indispensable to Whig interpreters of history: "The whig historian can draw lines through certain events, some such line as that which leads through Martin Luther and a long succession of whigs to modern liberty; . . . all demonstrating throughout the ages the workings of an obvious principle of progress, of which the Protestants and whigs have been perpetual allies, while Catholics and Tories have perpetually formed obstruction."³⁵ The individual conscience's act of defiance against a threatening institution with the instruments of violent repression at its service has left an ineradicable distrust of institutions in the liberal tradition.

Even more profoundly, the Lutheran moment has left a deep commitment to the liberties and heroism of individual conscience informed by its *reading*. No longer blocked and oppressed by a mediat-

ing institution, the individual Christian is finally able to read the Biblical text for him- or herself. Given the intimate connection between reading and liberty, a connection that underwrites all sites of reading, both professional and private, in Western culture, the Lutheran moment is hailed as an irreversible advance in the West. Thanks to Luther's brilliant textual polemic and courageous intervention, the private reader can ever afterward read in liberty, discovering the immense liberties and pleasures of private reading unobstructed by oppressive and threatening institutional demands.

One need only look at the arguments of the lesser Catholic combatants in the sixteenth-century confrontation over the vernacular Bible to see just how untenably poor their position can appear in the light of subsequent history. In 1539, a complainant to Thomas Cromwell reported that his vicar was persecuting him for reading the Bible. The vicar described the reading of God's word as "a green learning that will fade away"; he is reported to have called the Bible "the Book of Arthur Cobbler," and readers of it heretics.³⁶

Likewise, in the reign of Queen Mary, one John Standish produced a text entitled *A discourse, wherein it is debated whether it be expedient that the scripture should be in English for al men to reade* (London, 1554).³⁷ Standish begins tepidly by arguing that the question should be debated in Parliament, and that Scripture's translation would be appropriate if all English people were good Catholics—evidently far from being the case (images 2–3). From here on, however, the tract becomes rancorous in its hostility to vernacular translation. Things have gone badly ever since Bibles were made available in churches in 1539 (image 5); Scripture is difficult to understand, a point made often in Scripture itself (image 12); God wanted to preserve the sacred mysteries from the vulgar, and he did so through Scripture's rhetorical difficulty (image 18); Scripture is in any case very difficult to translate (image 31); and the letter kills (image 36). All those points

precede the real nadir of his "argument": most people are evil and most also ignorant (image 66); besides, servants have been stubborn and recalcitrant ever since vernacular Scripture was available to them (image 73).

Given crude and meanly distrustful arguments of this kind, the judgment of history has only one choice—to dismiss Standish and his ilk into the backwaters of historical losers. In cases like this, opposition to the Bible in English is opposition to both religious and linguistic freedom. In both cases that defense of freedom is located at the fundamental and non-negotiable point of unfettered Bible reading.

Positions of the kind put forth by Standish are obviously unpersuasive and unimpressive. In contrast, the promotion of widespread literacy by evangelical writers is indisputably attractive to the intellectual cultures, of pretty well all stripes, in the West since the sixteenth century. We might disagree about what we read, but no one disputes that reading is massively desirable.

This chiaroscuro of negative and positive positions—with, thankfully, one indisputable winner—may account for why the question of reading has played so muted, not to say nonexistent, a part of the recent revisionism of the English Reformation initiated by John Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh, and Eamon Duffy.³⁸ Duffy readily acknowledges a Catholic vulnerability in the revisionist flagship volume, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992): "Fear of Bible translations was a major weakness in the educational and devotional programme of late medieval English Catholicism."³⁹ Thereafter the topic is given hardly any profile whatsoever, surfacing only timidly in the account of Marian spirituality. Bibles were removed from parish churches by Marian officials, to be sure, but "Bible-reading or the possession of Bibles was never condemned by the regime." Cardinal Pole, although a committed Bible reader himself, felt it was better for

the people to absorb the faith through the liturgy, to find in attentive and receptive participation in the ceremonies and sacraments of the Church the grace and instruction on which to found the Christian life. This was the true Catholic way, the spirit of the *parvuli*, the "little ones" of Christ, for whom penitence, not knowledge, was the true and only way to salvation.⁴⁰

By the 1560s, Duffy tells us, the Bible commanded a new respect, even among participants in the Northern Rebellion of 1569, and "something of the old sense of the sacred was transferring itself from the sacramentals to the scriptures."⁴¹

In short, Duffy leaves the subject effectively untouched, and into that space (his weakest), Duffy's most formidable evangelical opponent, David Daniell, pours all the energy of the opposite point (his strongest), hailing Tyndale as the champion of the common reader.⁴² Whereas Duffy is nearly silent about Bible reading, Daniell is nearly silent about evangelical theology, beyond insistent, single-line references that imply that Daniell's own theology is the Christian norm.⁴³ Daniell is most certainly not silent, however, about the virtues of the common person reading the Scriptures in the vernacular, and the heroism, the scholarship, and the authorial brilliance of William Tyndale, who made that common reading possible.

Daniell is not alone in championing Tyndale as the source of liberal freedoms. Anne Richardson also sees Tyndale in this way, tracing a direct line between Tyndale and the U.S. Bill of Rights of 1791: "Such was the gospel of modernity that Tyndale brought us, his English-speaking heirs. It was from sheer pluck, based on belief in the equal standing of his people, *coram Deo*, that Tyndale made his case for a world humanized by law."⁴⁴ It is Daniell, however, through his tireless editorial work, who has provided the bibliographical basis for renewed interest in Tyndale, and it is Daniell who has promoted the idea of Tyndale as the forgotten champion of English liberties.

In Daniell's view, Tyndale plays the role to the English that Elijah played to the people of Judah. As with Tyndale under Henry VIII, only Elijah under Ahab "protested against the importation of a foreign religion."⁴⁵ Elijah "came to stand even more for the rights of ordinary people against tyranny."⁴⁶ Moses, too, provides another subtext for Daniell's narrative of Tyndale: turning the corner of the 1530s "was suddenly to be faced with a vast, sunlit territory, a land flowing with the milk and honey of new images and metaphors, and the rediscovered ancient monuments of God-given religious, political and social revelation."⁴⁷

Daniell's position is pretty well identical not only to that of sixteenth-century reformers themselves, but also to nineteenth-century Anglican champions of the "native religion" against the "foreign" parasite.⁴⁸ In keeping with those prior movements, Daniell claims that Tyndale represents both a revolution and a recovery of "native" continuities. This double claim, often made by revolutionary proponents, also has linguistic implications which Daniell, like his nineteenth-century predecessors, is not slow to highlight. The linguistic correlative is this: that Tyndale's recovery of "Saxon" English, with its frequently monosyllabic vocabulary and straightforward syntax, is also a repudiation of enervating, foreign language (that is, French and Latin). It was "during the mid-sixteenth century," when the "English language was a poor thing indeed, almost dead at the bottom of the pond," that Tyndale revived it,⁴⁹ and so demonstrated the "continued vitality of Saxon speech. It was never lost, and no more than colored by French. It was, indeed, during the mid-sixteenth century that the older Saxon roots of the language pushed up strong, fresh shoots through the leaf-mould of the forest floor."⁵⁰

Arguments of this kind themselves make manifest an unbroken continuity, though in this case with nationalist traditions of Protestant historiography that began in the sixteenth century and had a

powerful efflorescence in the nineteenth century.⁵¹ The manifest fragility of their linguistic evidence aside,⁵² it's surprising to find arguments like these made more than a hundred years after they were first brought forth in the full flush of British imperialism, and more than seventy years after unabashed theories of Germanic national character were used with such devastating effect across Europe.

Nor is Daniell shy about claiming Tyndale as the source of liberties exported to the whole world, in the face of tyranny. Perhaps the most revealing metaphor that Daniell offers for the Tyndalian Bible is the Russian tank in the Second World War.⁵³ Simple in design and built in factories distant from the front with massive determination, these tanks repelled the German war machine. The story of these tanks produced "the immense national driving power that was needed."⁵⁴ The tenor of this odd metaphor would seem to be that the Catholic Church was not unlike the German army, while the simple tanks play the role of vernacular scripture. Liberation from this foreign tyrant spread liberty, via Bible reading, not only to the United States but also, as Daniell frequently reminds us (in keeping with a powerful English tradition at once nationalist and imperialist), to "the whole world."⁵⁵ Everything that English spreads to the rest of the world advances under the banner of liberty, while all that the language imports must either bear the mark of tyranny, or else be rendered thoroughly "native."

❁ Daniell's strident nationalism and unexamined imperialism should not detain us at all; any counter-offensive would produce a broad, bland, and familiar set of arguments. It remains the case, however, that many readers who would find Daniell's nationalism offensive would nonetheless be persuaded by his claims about the progressive effects of Protestant Biblical reading. What I therefore propose in this book is a meditation on the truth of deep-set claims (by

no means restricted to nationalists like Daniell) regarding the unquestionably and unreservedly positive advances brought about by Protestant reading practice. Most broadly, I propose to develop an unusual suggestion: that evangelical reading did not produce either readerly liberty or freedom from institutional restraint. In particular, I underline the multiple ways in which the Biblical text can unleash different forms of violence. I'll focus especially on psychological violence directed against evangelical readers themselves. Here, by way of introduction, I declare the varieties of Biblical violence baldly; further chapters will supply evidence for each of these claims.

Most obviously, as in the case of Josiah, the book's authority as written document devastates alternative forms of cultural authority. The authoritative book, read in a certain way, legitimates violence in its many instances of violent narrative or injunction, in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

Second, and in ways more hidden from historical purview, the Biblical text, read within an evangelical reading regime, is capable of exerting a psychological violence on its own committed readers, in the experience of reading itself. Many Biblical texts are uncompromisingly austere, and under some conditions—with no recourse to anything but the literal sense, with the certainty that your experience of reading is a sure symptom of God's decision concerning you, and with the uncertainty that you are reading as a member of God's elect—Biblical reading can easily provoke both fear and self-loathing. For the evangelical reader, the Bible was in the first place a tightrope of terror across the abyss of damnation. Better a tightrope than nothing, if that's all that's available, but few of us are built to sustain that kind of challenge. As Richard Hooker was to say about the *scriptura sola* position in his *Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1586–c. 1593): "Admit this [*scriptura sola*] and what shall the scripture be but a snare and a torment to weak consciences, filling them with

infinite perplexities, scrupulosities, doubts insoluble, and extreme de-spairs!"⁵⁶

Finally, and not least, the authoritative book read under these conditions also unleashes an aggression and, not infrequently, a violence between different groups of evangelical readers themselves. In the Reformation, modes of reading became the criterion of institutional inclusion and exclusion—exclusion of all the evangelical's obvious enemies, but also, more interestingly, of other evangelical readers. As in any revolutionary situation that begins, perforce, as a movement of schism, the logic of schism remains deep within the schismatic movement. Revolutionary movements that begin thus tend to replicate the schism into further splinter groups, even, or perhaps especially, after the revolutionary victory.⁵⁷

Vulnerability to schism is particularly pronounced within the terms of an evangelical Biblical reading culture. For the evangelical reader is persuaded of the truth of his or her reading (and therefore of his or her salvation) by, and only by, what Tyndale calls a "feeling faith," an inner, passionate conviction of being chosen and forgiven. That this conviction should be authenticated by intense feeling alone proves an unsteady ground for institutional belonging and solidarity. Such movements tend to produce spectacular and heroic displays of authentication, most obviously in evangelical readiness to endure the flame.

One other spectacular display of authentication is, however, readiness to reject one's evangelical friends. A feeling faith cannot be fully trusted until it has been proved capable of striking at one's most intimate colleagues. In sixteenth-century England, evangelical culture was characterized and energized by profound personal distrust, along with its inevitable *Doppelgänger*—repudiation of, and attack on, former friends. A Protestant reading culture, leads, I suggest, to what a recent author has called the "persecutory imagination."⁵⁸ That

desolating experience of paranoia, or at least of being surrounded by nothing but ferocious and sharp-tongued enemies, is especially resonant within the courtier's experience of the Tudor court. That lived predicament was nourished by Biblical genres that were special favorites in court, notably the Psalms.

David Daniell claims that "too much has been made of the [Protestant] factionalism."⁵⁹ One might counter that claim by reference to the many wars and bitter disputes in both Germany and England between different Protestant groups; in this book I will be countering it by reference to a more personal context: the vicious betrayals by Tudor courtier evangelicals, and the bitter disputes between Tyndale and his own colleagues.

How has cultural history received the other main player in my narrative, Thomas More? The confrontation between More and Tyndale needs to be revisited because it has always, in my view, been misunderstood, to the detriment not only of More but, more significantly, to the detriment of an alternative, nonevangelical reading culture with its own compelling force. In English cultural history the More/Tyndale confrontation has consistently been set into a single, well-scripted narrative in which both players seem to play their part to perfection: on one side is the manic, persecuting, repressive Thomas More, who has rejected the civilized humanism for which he had earlier stood, and now leads the troop of all who are hostile to the vernacular Bible. On the other side, the solitary, persecuted Tyndale leads the heroic fight for liberty of conscience nourished by liberty to read the Scriptural Word in the vernacular.

Thomas More always produces division in English cultural history. Not even his supporters, however, much want to champion More the Catholic polemicist. Certainly those of an evangelical persuasion have always repudiated him as a hateful repressor of the Word. Those who admire More as humanist are repelled by his performance

as Catholic polemicist. Those who honor him as Catholic martyr and saint tend to focus on the events of 1534–1535 (imprisonment, refusal to acquiesce to royal demand, and execution bravely borne), rather than the events of 1523–1533 (anti-Lutheran polemic and legal persecution of religious opponents).⁶⁰

The confrontation between More and Tyndale has been read within sets of simple oppositions, of the following kinds (Catholic versus evangelical position): between the Bible in Latin and the Bible in English; between those who would preserve arcane knowledge for an elite few, as against those who wanted to publish that knowledge far and wide; between those who posited that the divine and allegorical mystery of the sacred text was so deep as to be intelligible only to the expert few, as opposed to those who saw the simplicity of the literal sense offering an invitation to all; and between those who would place the institution and authority of the Church above the individual reader, and those who promoted the individual reader. From these starting places, and with these supporters, there can only be one winner in cultural history. Thomas More has to lose this fight, not only because he did so in history, but also because he looks so bad within the non-negotiable commitments that almost all of us have to the right of liberty in our reading.

These starting places are, in my view, mistaken. For to characterize the whole debate in these terms is to misunderstand it, and to miss the opportunity to understand a much more significant confrontation. The debates and struggles that took place between 1520 and 1547 are about differing definitions of self and communities that derive from different reading practices. They are not primarily debates about vernacular translation, and neither are they, therefore, primarily debates about depriving lay readers of the Bible in English. It's also a confrontation that has the dimensions of tragedy, since each of the two reading cultures becomes more rigid in the face of the other,

and the Catholic side in particular contracts a kind of virus of literalism from the evangelical side, while the evangelicals contract an idolatry of the book and the written.⁶¹ This is the kind of confrontation in which both sides are inevitably and permanently transformed from within by contact with each other.

In short, this book looks again at one of Western culture's most stable narratives. Far from seeing the evangelical reading revolution as an unqualified boon, I argue that it imposed punishing pressures on those who adopted it. Rather than being at the root of liberal values, I argue that it is at the root of fundamentalism. Instead of seeing its Catholic enemy, in its most articulate form at any rate, as either stupid or hopelessly authoritarian, I argue that we should take stock of that alternative, communitarian tradition of reading.