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# The Dissolution of the Monasteries

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## Abstract

It is generally held that the monasteries were dissolved by Henry VIII and his leading minister Thomas Cromwell for financial reasons. This article suggests that more important factors were Henry VIII's determination to assert his royal authority and more clearly religious reasons, especially an erasmian scepticism about the value of institutions that set their face against the world and in which superstition flourished. At first Henry sought reform, dissolving the smaller monasteries while allowing monks and nuns to transfer to larger houses, but in the aftermath of the Pilgrimage of Grace, a great rebellion directed above all against that dissolution, the king aimed at and achieved total dissolution, a striking feature of which was the way in which monks and friars when surrendering their houses to the king subscribed to principled denunciations of their past way of life.

The dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s was one of the most revolutionary events in English history. There were nearly 900 religious houses in England, around 260 for monks, 300 for regular canons, 142 nunneries and 183 friaries; some 12,000 people in total, 4,000 monks, 3,000 canons, 3,000 friars and 2,000 nuns. If the adult male population was 500,000, that meant that one adult man in fifty was in religious orders.<sup>1</sup> Religious houses were everywhere; in towns, in remote rural areas. Monks, nuns and friars were altogether a familiar part of everyday life. Some monasteries were great landowners, on the scale of secular noblemen. Monastic buildings, especially their churches, were among the largest buildings to be seen, the largest on a par with cathedrals. To varying degrees monasteries were involved in hospitality, charity, artistic and musical patronage, scholarship and education. So comprehensive and rapid a change as the complete dissolution of monasteries could not but have a dramatic and dramatically visible effect. A society without monks, nuns and friars is qualitatively different from one with them. The briefest of comparisons between the subsequent development of England and, say, Spain, not just in terms of piety, but also in

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<sup>1</sup> M. D. Knowles and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: England and Wales* (1971) [hereafter Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses*], p. 494, and for the most comprehensive gazetteer.

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relation to poor relief and the care of the sick, brings that out very clearly. The sheer number of monks, and especially nuns, in *ancien régime* France meant that eighteenth-century France and England were very different societies. Of course, if monasteries had continued in England, they would not necessarily have remained the same. Reformed or new orders might well have held sway. Norman and Gothic churches would very likely have been baroquized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as were those of the German Catholic lands. So what we have lost – for example the Romanesque nave of Reading Abbey, now entirely vanished, with only rubble core walls from the former south transept precariously surviving elsewhere – might well have gone anyway, or been substantially remodelled. With roofs stripped of lead, and monastic precincts abandoned, buildings quickly deteriorated and turned into Shakespeare's 'bare ruin'd quires where once the sweet birds sang'. And those ruins surely had a powerful effect on English attitudes to the past, stimulating the characteristically English interest in antiquities, and, not least in the age of Romantic literature, in calling forth somewhat wistful and nostalgic attitudes to the past,<sup>2</sup> manifestly not present at the time of the dissolution itself when only a few such as the antiquary John Leland seem to have been concerned on aesthetic grounds at the loss of what Robert Aske, leader of the rebellion known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, called 'one of the beauties of the realm'.<sup>3</sup>

But if the sheer impact, short-term and long-term, of the dissolution of the monasteries amply justifies its study, what I wish to attempt today is rather to offer a revisionist view of the reasons behind the dissolution and of the ways it was done. On motivation, what I especially wish to contest is the prevailing belief, neatly articulated by Lucy Beckett, who in an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* confidently asserted that the dissolution of the monasteries 'is surprisingly short of ideology, let alone theology, and is almost entirely a story of greed', and went on to write that 'Henry's abolition of monastic life was a smash-and-grab raid on the wealth of the Church'.<sup>4</sup> In similar vein Howard Colvin, the great architectural historian, condemned the dissolution as 'the greatest single act of vandalism in English, perhaps in European history', carried out by 'a grasping and tyrannical king'.<sup>5</sup> The dissolution of monasteries was 'an act of resumption, a restoration to secular uses of land and other endow-

<sup>2</sup> M. Aston, 'English Ruins and English History: The Dissolution and the Sense of the Past', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, lxxv (1973), 231–55, echoed and endorsed by A. Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity and Memory in Early Modern Britain & Ireland* (Oxford, 2011), p. 274 (though Walsham's principal concern is with landscapes rather than with monastic buildings or monasteries as institutions).

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives [hereafter TNA], PRO, E36/119, fos. 96–6v (*L[etters and] P[apers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII]*, ed. J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner and R. H. Brodie, (21 vols. in 36, 1862–1932) [hereafter *LPI*], XII i 901 (2); M. Bateman, 'Aske's Examination', *English Historical Review*, v (1890), 561–2.

<sup>4</sup> *TLS*, 20 June 2008.

<sup>5</sup> H. M. Colvin, 'Recycling the Monasteries: Demolition and Reuse by the Tudor Government, 1536–47', in Colvin, *Essays in Architectural History* (1999), p. 52.

ments . . . Its inspiration and execution owed little to religious considerations', declared Joyce Youings.<sup>6</sup> Writing about the consequences of the dissolution, John Guy insists that 'there was little to suggest that Henry's Reformation had much to do with spiritual life, or with God'.<sup>7</sup> That the dissolution was highly destructive is self-evident; with the claim that Henry VIII was a tyrant I have no quarrel.<sup>8</sup> But we should be wary about interpreting the dissolution simply in material terms. For too long religion has been seen, in sub-Marxist terms, as no more than a reflection of class interests and conflicts. In that perspective the religious beliefs and practices of the monasteries were not at all significant; all that mattered was their wealth, which their enemies supposedly coveted. When religion is reduced like this to its material dimensions, the 'condescension of posterity' is not far away.

Undoubtedly Henry plundered the church and spent much of the proceeds on war. The revenues of the religious houses, mostly from their accumulated endowments of land, amounted to over £130,000 a year, if the valuations in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* may be trusted, probably double the revenue the crown received from its own estates.<sup>9</sup> But was seizing the wealth of the monasteries Henry's main motive?<sup>10</sup> What ini-

<sup>6</sup> J. A. Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (1971) [hereafter Youings, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*], p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> J. Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988) [hereafter Guy, *Tudor England*], p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Bernard, 'The Tyranny of Henry VIII', in *Authority and Consent in Tudor England*, ed. G. W. Bernard and S. J. Gunn (Aldershot, 2002), pp. 113–30.

<sup>9</sup> *LP*, XIV. ii. 428.

<sup>10</sup> For a succinct statement of the case that 'it was the Crown's own needs that dictated the scope and timing of the dissolution' see Guy, *Tudor England*, pp. 143–8, esp. p. 144. Cf. A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (2nd edn., 1989), pp. 167–8; C. S. L. Davies, *Peace, Print and Protestantism 1450–1558* (1976), pp. 190–4 (who says of the act of 1536 that 'the king needed more money', and more generally 'the aim was to enrich the crown'); C. Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford, 1993), p. 130 ('Though attack on the religious houses [in 1536] was a radical move, it was not, in origin, a religious one. It was cloaked in the language of spiritual reform, but the real motive was financial'); S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor Government 1485–1558* (Basingstoke, 1995) [hereafter Gunn, *Early Tudor Government*], pp. 115–16 (which treats the dissolution as intended to endow the crown and reward favourites); M. Nicholls, *A Modern History of the British Isles* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 40–1, 56–7 (which sees Henry VIII, rather puzzlingly, as 'torn between a desire to preserve the outward forms of his church, and the counter-attractions of new wealth'); R. Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (2nd edn., Basingstoke, 2006), p. 45 ('the dissolution of the monasteries, an enterprise in which the rhetoric of reformation soon became little more than a cloak for naked expropriation'); C. Giry-Deloison, *Le schisme d'Henri VIII* (Paris, 2006), p. 146 (seeing the act of 1536 as 'inscrit . . . dans le contexte plus large des mesures prises par royauté pour tenter d'enrayer ses difficultés de trésorerie'). It is interesting that Eamon Duffy barely mentions the dissolution of the monasteries in his chapters on 'the attack on traditional religion' in the late 1530s (E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400–c.1580* (1992) [hereafter Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*]). A. Ryrie sees Henry VIII as ransacking the 'temptingly wealthy' monasteries but admits that 'greed is not quite enough' to explain the dissolution (A. Ryrie, *The Age of Reformation: The Tudor and Stewart Realms 1485–1603* (Harlow, 2008), pp. 136–7; for L. Wooding, 'in part Henry's motives here were purely acquisitive'; more than most scholars, however, she gives due weight to political and religious motivations (L. Wooding, *Henry VIII* (2009), pp. 201–14). A rare exception was Hugh Trevor-Roper whose emphatic rejection of financial motives as the explanation of the dissolution (see n. 13 below) was heartening when I was first developing the arguments put forward here.

tially raises doubts is that anyone deliberately seeking to transfer the resources of the monasteries to the crown would have been much more careful to create a permanently enlarged crown estate. If succeeding monarchs had subsequently received larger revenues from their enhanced patrimony, that might have made the constitutional history of the seventeenth century very different. But it would have required time and prudence. After all, paying ex-monks pensions would have eaten up much of the ex-monasteries' income for a generation, and it would only have been much later that the crown would have been significantly better off. But Henry does not appear to have had any such long-run ambitions. Instead of looking to potential future income, he simply sold off the assets, above all the lands, which he seized, a once-and-for-all sale. He treated his gains as a windfall, like a gambler's win at the tables, and blew them quickly, especially in the years of war in the mid-1540s. By 1547 two-thirds of the monastic lands had been alienated.<sup>11</sup> Nor was the wealth of the monasteries deployed politically by the crown to buy the acquiescence of the ruling classes, in the break with Rome or to build up some supposedly more royalist class such as the gentry against the supposedly more unreliable feudal nobility; overwhelmingly ex-monastic land was sold at market prices, to those who already possessed wealth, and the consequence was to enhance, rather than to change, the existing social order. So I want to argue that much more than royal or ministerial greed was behind the dissolution: first, questions of authority, notably Henry's sense of his royal supremacy, and secondly, rival religious beliefs. And I do not believe that what happened was the unfolding of a master plan, but rather a series of responses to events.

I should begin by highlighting the widespread concern in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries about the condition of the monasteries. A leading figure here is the scholar and theologian Desiderius Erasmus who satirized monasteries as lax, as comfortably worldly, as wasteful of scarce resources, and as superstitious; he also thought it would be better if monks were brought more directly under the authority of bishops.<sup>12</sup> At that time quite a few bishops across Europe had come to believe that resources expensively deployed on an unceasing round of services by men and women in theory set apart from the world might be better spent on endowing grammar schools and university colleges to train men who would then serve the laity as parish priests, and on reforming the antiquated structures of over-large dioceses such as that of Lincoln. Pastoral care was seen as much more important and vital than the monastic ideals of contemplation, prayer and performance of the

<sup>11</sup> Guy, *Tudor England*, p. 145 and Gunn, *Early Tudor Government*, pp. 116–17 for differing perceptions; K. S. Wyndham, 'The Royal Estate in Mid Sixteenth-Century Somerset', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, lii (1979), 129–37.

<sup>12</sup> *LP*, IV. ii. 4692.

daily office.<sup>13</sup> Smaller monasteries were seen as especially unable to fulfil their obligations and were targeted by episcopal reformers. Cardinal Wolsey's dissolutions of some twenty-nine small religious houses are often seen as no more than self-aggrandizing, but in *The King's Cardinal* (1990) Peter Gwyn persuasively showed that Wolsey was sincere in his reforming intentions, most notably in the scheme for dissolving many religious houses in order to create new dioceses, a scheme abandoned on Wolsey's fall, just as delicate negotiations were on the point of success, but largely revived by Henry VIII a decade later.<sup>14</sup> It is striking that by the end of August 1518 Cardinal Wolsey and Cardinal Campeggio were appointed legates for the reformation of monasteries.<sup>15</sup> Wolsey held conferences in Westminster at which he pressed for reform.<sup>16</sup> He clearly believed that visitations – or inspections – would highlight shortcomings and then point the way to reformation, especially by the issuing of new 'constitutions' (present-day managers would talk of 'action plans'). That his concerns were far from unreasonable is suggested by the response of the Benedictines to his proposed reforms. They agreed that many of the rules ought to be followed enthusiastically by all good monks, but 'in these stormy times . . . those who desire a life of austerity and of regular observance are few, and indeed most rare'. The number of monks and monasteries in England was too great to allow such rules to be enforced without provoking murmurs and mutiny. They begged Wolsey to modify the reform of their order in order not to drive the weak into flight, apostasy or rebellion, nor to deter those who were intending to enter the order. There was no doubt that if Wolsey's reformation was conducted with too much austerity and rigour, there would be insufficient monks to fill the monasteries. In the present times, very few, they said, wished to live a life of austerity. Referring to relatively recently established new orders, they declared that only the Carthusians, Bridgettines and Observant Franciscans could do so. And if there were as many monasteries in England of those orders as there were of the Benedictine monks, 'certainly we do not see from where could be gathered such a multitude'

<sup>13</sup> *LP*, IV. i. 1470 (Archbishop Warham's defence of the dissolution of Tonbridge priory). Hugh Trevor-Roper's remarks are pertinent here: 'I have always taught my pupils that Henry VIII was intellectually an erasmian and that his practical aim was reform of the church in that sense; and that he planned to abolish monasteries *not* in order to raise cash for current expenses but in order to use monastic wealth to strengthen the episcopal – i.e. the working – church at the expense of the parasitic monastic establishment' (pers. comm., 16 Jan. 2000). Trevor-Roper acknowledged the influence of M. Bataillon, *Erasme et L'Espagne: recherches sur l'histoire spirituelle du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1937) (most accessible now in the new edition of 1997 with a preface by Jean-Claude Margolin).

<sup>14</sup> T. Rymer, *Foedera* (2nd edn., 1728) [hereafter Rymer, *Foedera*], xiv. 291–4; *LP*, IV. ii. 4900, 4921 (2), iii. 5266, 5638–9; cf. P. J. Gwyn, *The King's Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Thomas Wolsey* (1990) [hereafter Gwyn, *King's Cardinal*], pp. 464–79, 331–7.

<sup>15</sup> *LP*, III. i. 1124, 1216; IV. i. 585.

<sup>16</sup> *LP*, III. i. 475, 693; Polydore Vergil, *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil*, ed. and trans. D. Hay, Camden Society, lxxiv (1950), pp. 259–60.



so that their houses could be filled. That was a remarkably damaging self-defence.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the years of Henry VIII's search for a divorce and ultimate break with Rome came at a time when scepticism about monasteries was fashionable (and in the Germany of Martin Luther and in Swiss cities had in the 1520s and early 1530s been taken to the point of dissolution). When Henry increased the pressures on churchmen over his divorce and began boldly to assert his independence from the papacy, the most significant opposition he faced came from some religious orders. The Observant Franciscans of Greenwich had been founded by Edward IV and strongly supported by Henry VII. Henry VIII was baptised there as were his daughters Mary and Elizabeth. On Easter Day 1532 William Peto, leader of the English province, preached on how King Ahab gave ear to false prophets who urged him to fight but would not listen to God's prophet Micaiah who warned him that he would be killed if he did: identifying himself with Micaiah, Peto publicly warned Henry that if he divorced Catherine of Aragon dogs would lick his blood, as they had that of Ahab.<sup>18</sup> Some Observant Franciscan friars at Canterbury were protectors and mentors of Elizabeth Barton, the nun who prophesied that if Henry married Anne Boleyn, he would not live long.<sup>19</sup> Several Carthusian monks were prepared to die as martyrs rather than to swear an oath to the act of succession by which they would have implicitly accepted the justice of Henry's break with Rome and the legitimacy of Henry's supreme headship of the church.<sup>20</sup> With isolated exceptions (Bishop John Fisher alone of the bishops, and Sir Thomas More among prominent laymen), that was the heart of opposition to Henry's divorce and break with Rome. It was not organized political opposition, and certainly not rebellion, but it was at best embarrassing and at worst threatening to the king. In fact almost all monks, nuns and friars went along with the royal supremacy, swearing the oaths required, as far as we know, and the monks who refused were no more than a tiny minority of monks and nuns as a whole. But perceptions matter here. And from Henry's perspective it was from

<sup>17</sup> *Documents illustrating the Activities of the General and Provincial Chapters of the English Black Monks, 1215–1540*, iii, ed. W. A. Pantin, Camden Society, 3rd ser., liv (1937), no. 283, pp. 123–4 (re-dated) (translation in *LP*, IV. i. 953 and in M. Heale, *Monasticism in Late Medieval England c.1300–1535* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 136–7); Gwyn, *King's Cardinal*, p. 273.

<sup>18</sup> TNA, PRO, PRO31/18/2/1, fo. 726v (*LP*, V 941; *Calendar of State Papers, Spanish* [hereafter *Cal. S. P., Spanish*], IV. ii, no. 934, pp. 427–8; Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Pretended Divorce between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon*, Camden Society, 2nd ser., xxi (1878), p. 203.

<sup>19</sup> T. Wright, ed., *Letters relating to the Suppression of the Monasteries*, Camden Society (1843) [hereafter Wright, *Suppression*], pp. 14–15 (*LP*, VI 1466); 25 Henry VIII c.12 (*Statutes of the Realm*, iii. 449, 446); TNA, PRO, SP1/82, fo. 74v; *Cal. S. P., Spanish*, IV. ii, no. 1149 p. 857; *LP*, VI. 1419; *LP*, VI. 1468 (1) ), printed by E. H. Shagan, 'Print, Orality and Communications in the Maid of Kent Affair', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, lii (2001), 31–2; *LP*, VI. 1417, 1470.

<sup>20</sup> G. W. Bernard, *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (2005) [hereafter Bernard, *King's Reformation*], pp. 160–7.

religious orders that the most awkward reactions to his policies had come, and from those religious orders generally regarded as the best contemporary exemplars of the monastic ideal. Monastic houses belonged to international orders, potential fifth columns all. Having repudiated papal authority Henry was not surprisingly unsympathetic to any institutions which looked up to the pope. And that, I suggest, offers the crucial context in which to understand the visitations of the monasteries in 1534-5.

Henry was determined that monasteries should recognize his authority. The imposition of various oaths of allegiance was directed especially against monks, nuns and friars. Once he had broken with Rome, in January 1535 he appointed Thomas Cromwell as his vicegerent in spirituals to assert royal authority over the monasteries. The purpose of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, the great survey of monastic wealth in 1535, was both to provide a body of information on which taxation could be based and to assert royal authority. And there was no more direct way to assert that royal authority over the monasteries than to carry out a visitation under that authority – cutting across traditional privileges and exemptions. Monks, nuns and friars who submitted to a royal visitation were by that fact alone acquiescing in the new order.

The visitations of 1535-6 went further, closely examining the condition of the monasteries. Often Henry VIII, Cromwell and the individual visitors are presented as cynically blackening the reputation of the monasteries in preparation for the dissolution.<sup>21</sup> In some ways the visitation came close to questioning the intrinsic purposes of monasteries. The tone of the questions the visitors were to ask betrays doubts about small religious houses, about the quality of leadership provided by abbots, about the commitment of monks and nuns to their vocation, about their chastity, about their obedience to the rule of their house.<sup>22</sup> Yet none of this necessarily and inescapably led to dissolution. It might just as readily have led to reform and renewal, the visitation's ostensible purpose. The principal visitors of the monastic houses, Richard Layton, John Tregonwell, Thomas Legh and John ap Rice, were also involved in visitations of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. That those visitations were designed to reform, rather than to discredit and destroy, the universities seems plain:<sup>23</sup> would it not make sense to see the king as having similarly reforming plans for the monasteries?

<sup>21</sup> e.g. 'The visitors, whose brief seems to have been to provide Cromwell with the ammunition he needed to damn the monasteries, not to reform them': Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 384; very soon after the visitation began, 'the primary aim now was to extract damaging confessions': M. D. Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, iii: *The Tudor Age* (Cambridge, 1959) [hereafter Knowles, *Tudor Age*], p. 270.

<sup>22</sup> D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britannie* (4 vols., 1737) [hereafter Wilkins, *Concilia*], iii. 786-91, from British Library [hereafter BL], Cotton MS, Cleopatra E iv, fos. 13-23.

<sup>23</sup> F. D. Logan, 'The First Royal Visitation of the English Universities, 1535', *English Historical Review*, cvi (1991), 861-88.



Closely scrutinized, the visitation of religious houses appears to have been conducted reasonably and efficiently: it was not absurdly rushed.<sup>24</sup> Of course, as anyone who has experienced modern teaching inspections knows, visitations are far from reliable. And the visitors of 1534-5 undoubtedly undertook their task wearing Erasmian spectacles. Their scepticism about monasticism is only too evident. It is especially striking that they treated much of what was associated with pilgrimage, including relics and images of saints, with mocking disbelief, a topic to which we shall return, and warned monks 'that they shall not show no relics or feigned miracles for increase of lucre'.<sup>25</sup> They listed relics under the category 'superstitio'.<sup>26</sup> They had doubts about the efficiency with which abbots had managed their houses. They suspected that the demands of the monastic rule, especially on poverty and enclosure, had not always been met.

Most famously the visitation unearthed what was presented as devastating evidence of sexual misconduct. Again, this is often seen as invented with the aim of damning the monks and nuns.<sup>27</sup> But careful examination reveals a more complex picture. Our principal source, what is known as the *Compendium Compertorum*, the book of findings, of the visitation by Layton and Legh of the dioceses of York and Coventry and Lichfield, lists, monastery by monastery, the names of monks who admitted their offences.<sup>28</sup> What is striking is that the most commonly confessed offence was not sodomy, at least in its modern sense, as historians relying on the summaries in the *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, have supposed. In the documents themselves the categories 'sodom' or 'sodomite' or 'incontinentia' are given in the margins; names of offenders are bracketed alongside, together with further brief descriptions of the offence. Some 113 monks were named as guilty of 'incontinentia' with women. Seventeen nuns had borne children and a further eleven were incontinent. In addition, on the face of it, a good many monks confessed to sodomy. But the categories into which sodomy was subdivided are revealing. There were sodomites with boys – thirteen such cases. There was one monk alongside whose name is the phrase 'passus sodomitica', that is a person who has submitted sodomitically. All the rest, overwhelmingly the most common subcategory of sodomy, some 170, are bracketed together monastery by monastery in the margin but alongside their names is the phrase 'per voluntarias polluciones', which can only mean masturbation. Such sexual

<sup>24</sup> A. Shaw, 'The Compendium Compertorum', University of Warwick MA thesis, 1998; id., 'Re-visiting the Royal Visitation of the Monasteries 1535/1536', unpublished paper, April 2000. I am most grateful to Tony Shaw for a copy, and many fruitful discussions of his forthcoming monograph. His refutation of the criticisms made by Knowles (Knowles, *Tudor Age*, pp. 286–7) that the speed of the visitors shows 'a total lack of principle' is compelling.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkins, *Concilia*, iii. 789–91 from BL, Cotton MS, Cleopatra E iv, fos. 21–3.

<sup>26</sup> LP, X. 364 (1)

<sup>27</sup> e.g. Guy, *Tudor England*, p. 147.

<sup>28</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/102, fos. 85–100 (or 91–114) (LP, X. 364 [1]; BL, Cotton MS, Cleopatra E iv, fos. 147–59 (a copy).

misconduct had not generally been pursued in monastic visitations, and by its nature it would usually only be known if confessed. So it was not the case that the commissioners were more efficient in rooting out serious offences than previous episcopal visitors who tended to find fewer failings had been, but that these commissioners were applying especially stringent standards. And perhaps when, after the visitation was completed, the Compendium was drawn up, masturbation was lumped into the category of sodomy to make the monks' sexual offences appear more heinous than they were.

Indeed it is just thinkable that all this was made up with the intention of discrediting the religious. Yet the visitors did not find sexual misconduct everywhere; the reports do not come across as consistent and coordinated black propaganda. And later both the king and the writer Richard Morison would refer to 'their own confessions subscribed with their own hands' and to those who 'with their own mouths had given sentence against themselves'.<sup>29</sup> Masturbation, in particular, was an offence that was likely to remain private unless confessed. If monks and nuns confessed to misconduct, these then were not charges made by prejudiced critics on the basis of hearsay. Why did they confess? No doubt in some cases their misconduct was flagrant, and denial would be pointless, as, for example, when a nun was pregnant. And they may well have had an acute sense that they had done wrong. But what they surely expected was to undertake appropriate penances; not that their conduct would be deployed to blacken monasticism as a whole.

And it is worth noting that when the offending monks and nuns listed in the Compendium are counted and their numbers are compared with the total populations of their monasteries and nunneries, the proportions offending turn out to be low. In the 48 religious houses in the northern Compendium for which we have numbers,<sup>30</sup> out of a total of 674 monks, 74 confessed to incontinence with women, 4 to sodomy with boys and 114 to masturbation. Some 28 per cent admitted breaking their vow of chastity, less than 1 per cent by sodomy with boys, 9 per cent were incontinent with women, and 17 per cent admitted masturbation. Over 70 per cent of the monks in these houses did not admit breaking their vows of chastity, and nearly 90 per cent did not admit any sexual relations with others. Once again all this comes down to perception. Scrutinizing the surviving sources a twenty-first-century historian is more likely to be impressed by the apparently high rate of observance of vows of chastity than aghast at admitted lapses. But for visitors already sceptical of the state of the monastic houses, for Henry VIII and for Thomas Cromwell, in an age not strong in a sense of statistical proportion, the findings of the visitations may well have seemed shocking, and consequently reinforced their embedded scepticism about the monastic way of life.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, PRO, E36/118, fo. 92 (*LP*, XI 780 [2]; SP6/13, fos. 16–24 at 17v (*LP*, XI 1409; cf. A. Stewart, *Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England* (Princeton, 1997)).

<sup>30</sup> I rely here on Knowles, *Tudor Age* and Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses*.

And, judging from the surviving preamble of a draft bill not pursued and a memorandum by Cromwell, there were discussions about what should be done to reform the monasteries.<sup>31</sup> The upshot was the parliamentary act of 1536 dissolving the smaller monasteries, defined as all houses with an annual income of less than £200.<sup>32</sup> This is often presented as insincere (not least since in the preamble it was houses with fewer than twelve inmates rather than those with a low income which were condemned) and no more than the first step in a general dissolution. But that may be a misleading deduction. In that widespread perception that monastic houses were in need of reform, it had long been smaller houses that were targeted for criticism, and in Wolsey's ascendancy, for dissolution. Visitation records survive only patchily, but it does seem that it was the smaller houses in which there were the greatest abuses; quite a few of the larger houses were commended even by generally sceptical visitors.<sup>33</sup> The royal visitors found little to criticize at Lacock ('we can find no excesses'; 'the house is well ordered'), Glastonbury ('I doubt not that they will keep as good religion as any house in the kingdom') and Ramsey ('I pray God I may find other houses in no worse condition').<sup>34</sup> Where spectacular abuses were found, the house was almost always small. To present smaller houses as failing was not new, nor was it unsupported by evidence. It was probably too broad-brush, given that not all small houses were full of abuses, but nonetheless it does seem that smaller houses were more likely to be falling short.

Was the act dissolving the smaller houses sincerely intended as a work of religious reform? Should we take the vivid preamble at face value? 'Forasmuch as manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories and other religious houses . . . where the congregation of such religious persons is under the number of twelve persons', it was enacted that such small houses, where 'vicious living shamelessly increaseth', should be 'utterly suppressed'. The only remedy was the suppression of such small houses – but also the transfer of religious persons in them to 'great and honourable monasteries of religion', 'the great solemn monasteries of this realm, wherein thanks be to God, religion is right well kept and observed'. Nothing but good was said about the larger monasteries in this act.<sup>35</sup> And the provision for transfers was striking. Monks and nuns who wished to remain in the religious life were allowed to transfer to larger monasteries. It is difficult to see why such a provision would have been included if the ultimate aim of the government had been to dissolve them all. It was not just a sop, a concession without consequences.<sup>36</sup> A good many monks and

<sup>31</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/102, fos. 5–9 (*LP*, X 254); SP6/1/25, fos. 249–50 (*LP*, X. 246 [16]).

<sup>32</sup> 27 Henry VIII, c.28 (*Statutes of the Realm*, iii. 575–5).

<sup>33</sup> P. Cunich, 'The Dissolution', in *Monks of England: The Benedictines in England from Augustine to the Present Day*, ed. D. Rees (1997), 148–66, at p. 154.

<sup>34</sup> *LP*, IX. 139, 160, 253; X. 103.

<sup>35</sup> 27 Henry VIII, c.28 (*Statutes of the Realm*, iii. 575–5).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. S. Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors* (2000), p. 127.

nuns took advantage of the provision, indeed so many that some smaller houses were exempted from the dissolution (a section in the act gave the king powers to exempt houses from dissolution) and even allowed to expand. Only some 243 smaller houses out of 419 worth less than £200 per annum were actually dissolved. Some were doubtless spared by effective lobbying. But most were exempted because of the large numbers of monks and nuns who wished to continue in religion, as Woodward has shown in a detailed study of smaller monasteries in Yorkshire.<sup>37</sup> And all this reinforces the case for seeing the dissolutions of 1536 as intended to reform the monasteries, rather than a step towards their total destruction. Transfers from houses too small in numbers and too poor in revenues to live up to the monastic ideal offered the prospect of rationalized and reformed monasteries. Could then the medium-term effect of the dissolutions of 1536 have been a revived monastic sector, with reformed large monasteries as the flagships of the rule? We should not be too dismissive. After all, the history of medieval monasticism had been a history of reforms and revivals. It may be that the reform ostensibly espoused in 1536 was an illusion, that too much of what was central in monasticism had already been questioned. But that can be challenged from two directions. First, Henry VIII may well not have grasped that his scepticism about monasteries had such larger implications. Secondly, some such reformed monasticism may have been feasible; later counter-reformation orders often reflect just such an erasmian and ascetic impulse. But that must remain speculation, for any attempted reforms were not given the time they would have required.

What changed everything was the rebellion known as the Pilgrimage of Grace in autumn 1536. Among churchmen, university scholars and royal officials, monasteries, and especially small monasteries, may have increasingly been seen as problems, as wasteful, as superstitious, as immoral. But such perceptions were emphatically not shared by gentry, yeomen, labourers, artisans. For them monasteries, however imperfect, continued to perform vital spiritual and pastoral functions. During the course of the summer and early autumn of 1536 commissioners were going round the country dissolving the smaller houses, turning out the monks, stripping the roofs, all very public acts. At that time rumours grew that Henry VIII was planning to confiscate the treasures of parish churches such as processional crosses and that many parish churches would be closed.<sup>38</sup> There was no truth in the rumours but the dissolution

<sup>37</sup> G. W. O. Woodward, 'The Exemption from Suppression of Certain Yorkshire Priors', *EHR*, lxxvi (1961), 385–401.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/118, fo. 254 (*LP*, XII. i. 1011); E36/119, fo. 7 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 [v]); E36/119, fo. 14 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 [x]); E36/119, fo. 7: (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (v)). (cf. E36/119, fo. 14 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (x))); E36/119, fo. 13 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (ix)); SP1/109, fo. 14v (*LP* XI. 828 (xiii)); E36/119, fo. 8v (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (vi)); E36/119, fo. 46 (*LP*, XII. i. 380) (cf. SP1/109, fo. 204 (*LP*, XIV. 879 (2) but details omitted from *LP*); E36/119, fo. 14 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (x)) (cf. E36/119, fo. 15 (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (xi))); E36/119, fo. 8v (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (vi)); E36/119, fo. 5v (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (iii)); E36/119, fo. 46 (*LP*, XII. i. 380); SP1/110, fos. 142–7, esp. 143v, 144 (*LP*, XI. 970) (cf. E36/119, fos. 3–3v (*LP*, XII. i. 70 (i))); SP1/109, fo. 8v (*LP*, XI. 828 (vi)); E36/118, fo. 5 (*LP*, XI. 975, fo. 4); SP1/109, fo. 10 (*LP*, XI. 828 (vii)).

of the smaller monasteries made them appear plausible. 'Because the people saw many abbeys pulled down in deed, they believed all the rest to the true', testified John Hallom.<sup>39</sup> And risings broke out over much of northern England in protest against religious changes, both accomplished and feared. Historians have long disputed the causes and concerns of the rebellion, with some seeing them as fiscal, constitutional, localist or narrowly political, again all too often refusing to treat religion as anything more than an expression of material interests, but I have argued that the dissolution of the monasteries was a central concern.<sup>40</sup> When the rebels compelled the duke of Norfolk to make a deal in early December, the terms were brief. That the rebels would enjoy a free pardon for any offences they had committed was a standard concession in such circumstances. That a parliament would be held in York was much more unusual: what the rebels doubtless expected is that in that parliament laws which they disliked such as that dissolving the smaller monasteries would be repealed. There was one final, highly revealing, point: that until parliament met, abbeys would stand.<sup>41</sup> That was the only specific, concrete demand, and it shows, I argue, just how central the dissolution was in the concerns of the rebels. Indeed on the very first day of the rising the commons of Louth having secured their parish church so that its treasures could not be confiscated, and having disrupted the work of the commissioners intending to question the clergy, they then went to Legbourne nunnery, just one and half miles away, captured two of Cromwell's servants, working as administrators there following its dissolution, and burnt the books of the king's surveyors of dissolved monasteries at Louth Park Priory.<sup>42</sup> The rebels brought the process of dissolution in Lincolnshire to a halt. Further north the rebels restored several recently dissolved monasteries, including North Ferriby, Healaugh, Coverham, Easby, St Clement's and Holy Trinity York, Sawley, Conishead and Cartmel.<sup>43</sup> All that shows a rather different attitude to the monasteries from that of Erasmus – or Henry VIII. Robert Aske, leader of the Pilgrimage, who testified that 'the suppression of abbeys was the greatest

<sup>39</sup> TNA, PRO, E36/119, fos. 26–7 (*LP*, XII. i. 392 [i]; cf. R.W. Hoyle, *The Pilgrimage of Grace* (Oxford, 2001), p. 91.

<sup>40</sup> Bernard, *King's Reformation*, pp. 344–79.

<sup>41</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/112, fos. 151–1v, 153–3v (*LP*, XI. 1270).

<sup>42</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/109, fo. 2 (*LP*, XI. 828 [i] [1]; SP1/106, fo. 291 (*LP*, XI. 567).

<sup>43</sup> North Ferriby: TNA, PRO, E36/118, fos. 82–2v (*LP*, XII. i. 392, p. 193); M. L. Bush, *The Pilgrimage of Grace* (Manchester, 1996) [hereafter Bush, *Pilgrimage of Grace*], pp. 43–4; TNA, PRO, SP1/117, fo. 216 (*LP*, XII. i. 793). Healaugh: Bush, *Pilgrimage of Grace*, p. 50; Coverham, TNA, PRO, E36/118, fo. 108 (*LP*, XII. i. 29 [2]; cf. *LP*, XI. 677; Bush, *Pilgrimage of Grace*, p. 163; TNA, PRO, SP1/120, fo. 265 (*LP*, XII. i. 1326). Easby: TNA, PRO, E36/118, fo. 108 (*LP*, XII. i. 29 [2]); *LP*, XI. 481. St Clement's and Holy Trinity, York: TNA, PRO, SP1/109, fo. 199 (*LP*, XI. 879); D. M. Palliser, *The Reformation in York 1534–1553*, Borthwick Papers, xl (1970), p. 10, inferring reoccupation of Holy Trinity from *LP*, XII. i. 536 and TNA, PRO, SP1/119, fo. 87 (badly worn) (*LP*, XII. i. 1087). Sawley: TNA, PRO, SP1/108, fo. 180 (*LP*, XI. 784 [i]); SP1/116, fo. 116 (*LP*, XII. i. 506). Conishead and Cartmel: C. Haigh, *The Last Days of the Lancashire Monasteries and the Pilgrimage of Grace*, Chetham Society, xvii (1969) [hereafter Haigh, *Lancashire Monasteries*], pp. 62, 46.



cause of the said insurrection', would eloquently justify the monasteries. The abbeys in the north 'gave great alms to poor men and laudably served God'. By the dissolution

the divine service of God is much diminished, great number of masses unsaid and the blessed consecration of the sacrament not now used and showed in those places, to the distress of the faith and spiritual comfort to men's soul, the temple of God ruffed and pulled down, the ornaments and relics of the church of God unreverent used, tombs and sepulchres of honourable and noble men pulled down and sold. None hospitality in those places kept . . . and the profits of these abbeys yearly goeth out of the country to the king's highness . . . And diverse and many of the said abbeys were in the mountains and desert places, where the people be of rude conditions and not well taught the law of God, and when the abbeys stood the said people not only had worldly refreshing in their bodies but spiritual refuge, both by ghostly living of them and by spiritual information and preaching.

Abbeys looked after their tenants and servants 'so that the people was greatly refreshed by the said abbeys, where now they have no such succour'.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps it was because Robert Aske realized that Henry and his councillors did not share his commitment to the traditional religious functions of monasteries that he emphasized their social and economic role and did not allude to pilgrimages or relics. But he did emphasize their role in 'the divine service of almighty God'. What Aske's testimony and the actions of so many in the rebellions of autumn 1536 show is how rival perceptions can be found in the same society. Aske and Erasmus were poles apart.

And what Henry VIII saw as a rebellion in defence of monasteries swiftly turned his erasmian scepticism into outright hostility. On hearing that the abbot and monks of the dissolved monastery of Sawley in the West Riding of Yorkshire had re-entered their house he ordered Edward Stanley, third earl of Derby, that if this were true he should 'without further delay cause the said abbot and certain of the chief monks to be hanged upon long pieces of timber or otherwise out of the steeple, and the rest to be put to execution in such sundry places as you shall think meet for the example of others'.<sup>45</sup> On hearing about disturbances at Norton, where the abbot gathered 200–300 men, Henry ordered that his commissioners should 'without any maner further circumstances of our lawe or delay cause them to be hanged as most arraunt traytors in such sondry places as ye shall thynke requisite for the terrible exemple of all others hereafter'.<sup>46</sup> And the king's monachophobia hardened steadily. Henry deeply believed in exemplary justice and several abbots became victims of his rage. Some had been actively involved in the rebellion and could be

<sup>44</sup> TNA, PRO, E36/119, fos. 96–6v (*LP*, XII. i. 901 (2) ).

<sup>45</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/109, fos. 224–4v (*LP*, XI. 894).

<sup>46</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/108, fo. 187 (*LP*, XI. 787); SP1/112, fo. 48 (*LP*, XI. 1212 [2])



supposed to have brought their punishment on themselves; others had been much more ambivalent, sending the rebels food and drink or dispatching representatives to rebel assemblies, albeit rather reluctantly and under duress, but that did not save them. Although the duke of Norfolk had been compelled to make a deal with the rebels in which abbeys would stand, Henry, as his correspondence shows, had not the slightest intention of honouring that pledge. He wrote to Sir William Fitzwilliam and Sir John Russell, then in the north, 'to ascertain you plainly of our mind in that point touching the abbeys, we shall never consent to their desires but adhere to our right therein to the uttermost being as justly entitled therunto as to the imperial crown of our realm'.<sup>47</sup> In his instructions to the duke of Norfolk and the earl of Sussex in January 1537 Henry went still further. If anyone supported the monks, Norfolk was to 'dilate how far they vary from good religious men'. Monks who refused to transfer were 'obstinate persons' to be treated as 'sturdy and idle vagabonds' rather than men who had forsaken the world. How could they call themselves poor if they would not live except as they wished? 'What obedience is in him that will direct his prince and sovereign lord to whom by God's commandment he ought in all things to obey?'<sup>48</sup> On 22 February Henry attacked monks as hypocrites. Since 'all these troubles have ensued by the solicitation and traitorous conspiracies of the monks and canons of those parties', Norfolk, on coming to any monastery that had been restored or had resisted, should 'without pity or circumstance . . . cause all the monks and canons that be in any wise faulty to be tied up without further delay or ceremony to the terrible example of others'.<sup>49</sup> The abbots of Whalley, Barlings and Kirkstead, suspected of involvement in the rebellions, were attainted of treason: interestingly their monasteries were then confiscated by the crown, as if the abbots had been laymen.<sup>50</sup>

The fate of one monastery is especially significant. Henry and his lieutenant were convinced that the abbots and monks of Furness had been deeply involved in the troubles but they could not prove it. What was decided after some thought – if only we knew more of the details – was that the abbot and monks would be invited to surrender their monastery to the king in return for pensions and exemptions from prosecution. The legality of such a procedure is by no means clear. A monastery was not the abbot's or the monks' private property which they could dispose of as they pleased. But nonetheless that is what was done. This monastery was encouraged to surrender because the king wanted vengeance for what he supposed was the abbot's and monks' involvement

<sup>47</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/112, fos. 151–6 at 153–3v and 151–1v (*LP*, XI. 1271).

<sup>48</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/115, fos. 148–9v (*LP*, XII. i. 98 [1]); E36/118, fos. 178–8v (*LP*, XII. i. 98 [2]); SP1/115, fos. 150–3v.

<sup>49</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/116, fos. 97–7v (*LP*, XII. i. 479); *State Papers of Henry VIII*, i. no. lxxxvi p. 538

<sup>50</sup> TNA, PRO, SP1/116, fo. 251 (*LP*, XII. ii. 630, 632); *LP*, IX. 881, XII. i. 668, 639, 677.

in rebellion. The procedure employed was shortly afterwards to be used more generally.<sup>51</sup>

At some point in late 1537 Henry and his counsellors must have agreed on attempting the dissolution of all the monasteries. There is no smoking gun, no document, no record of debates or discussions. For much of 1537, churchmen were hard at work devising the formulation of belief known as the *Bishops' Book*: it covers Christian doctrine quite thoroughly, but monasteries and monasticism are absent. It is possible that when Lewes Priory and Castle Acre Priory agreed to surrender in late 1537, the lands being divided between Henry's leading counsellors Thomas Cromwell and Thomas, third duke of Norfolk who had been vigorous in repressing the Pilgrimage of Grace, that was still an isolated act.<sup>52</sup> But soon afterwards groups of royal commissioners started touring the country. They were clearly acting under royal instructions. And what they did, in 1538, in 1539, and the early months of 1540, was to suggest to the heads of the religious houses that they and their monks should surrender their monasteries to the crown.<sup>53</sup> A very few held out for a time; ultimately the abbots of Glastonbury, Reading and Colchester were executed, on various grounds, but in reality for their refusals to surrender their abbeys.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere the surrenders went through without a hitch. And by 1540 every monastery had gone (with the partial exception of the seven monasteries associated with cathedrals, and six Benedictine houses, notably Westminster Abbey, which were transformed into secular cathedrals, and some fifty monastic churches which were turned into parish churches).

<sup>51</sup> *LP*, XII. i. 706; *State Papers*, i, no. lxxxiii, pp. 541–2. Probably misdated and 28 rather than 24 March: cf. *LP*, XII. i. 840; TNA, PRO, SP1/118, fos. 7, 5 (*LP*, XII. i. 841 (3 i, ii); *LP*, XII. i. 652, cf. *LP*, XII. i. 842); SP1/117, fo. 72 (*LP*, XII. i. 695); BL, Cotton MS, Cleopatra E iv, fos. 244–5 (*LP*, XII. i. 840, cf. Haigh, *Lancashire Monasteries*, p. 98; BL, Cotton MS, Cleopatra E iv, fo. 246 (Wright, *Suppression*, no. lxxiv, pp. 153–4; *LP*, XII. i. 832, 903); E322/91 (*LP*, XII. i. 880); *LP*, XII. i. 896.

<sup>52</sup> *LP*, XII. ii. 1101, 1119, 1062, 1030, 1151 (2), 1154, 1311 (30); XIII. i. 290; grant to Cromwell *LP*, XIII. i. 384 (74).

<sup>53</sup> Youngs, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*, pp. 56–90 for an account.

<sup>54</sup> Glastonbury: Wright, *Suppression*, no. cxxvi, pp. 255–6 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 206); *LP*, XIV. ii. 185; H. Ellis, *Original Letters illustrative of British History* (11 vols. in 3 series, 1824) III. iii. 247; *LP*, XIV. ii. 389; Wright, *Suppression*, no. cxxvii, pp. 257–8 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 232); Wright, *Suppression*, no. cxxviii, p. 259 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 272); Wright, *Suppression*, no. cxxx, pp. 261–2 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 531); Wright, *Suppression*, no. cxxix, pp. 259–60 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 530); cf. J. H. Bethey, *Suppression of the Monasteries in the West Country* (Gloucester, 1989), p. 102. Reading: *LP*, XIII. ii. 346; *LP*, XIII. ii. 377; *LP*, XII. ii. 1205, 1220, 1252, 1256; *LP*, XIV. ii. 49, 136, 256; PRO, KB9/548, fo. 4 printed by J. E. Paul, 'The Last Abbots of Reading and Colchester', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxxiii (1960) [hereafter Paul, 'The Last Abbots of Reading and Colchester'], 118–19; *LP*, XIV. ii. 613; cf. G. R. Elton, *Policy and Police* (Cambridge, 1972) [hereafter Elton, *Policy and Police*], p. 195. The indictments are TNA, PRO, KB9/458, fos. 4–6; cf. KB9/458, fo. 1; cf. Paul, 'The Last Abbots of Reading and Colchester', 115–21; *LP*, XV. 259; cf. 269; BL, Cotton MS, Titus B i., fo. 433 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 399); Elton, *Policy and Police*, p. 305. Colchester: *LP*, XIV. ii. 459, 458 (cf. 45), 454; TNA, PRO, SP1/154, fos. 79–81 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 439); SP1/139, fo. 74 (*LP*, XIII. ii. 887); *LP*, XIII. ii. 764; Elton, *Policy and Police*, p. 156; TNA, PRO, SP1/154, fos. 79–81 (*LP*, XIV. ii. 439); *LP*, XIV. ii. 554; KB9/545/fos. 34–41 cited by Elton, *Policy and Police*, p. 156; PRO, SP1/156, fo. 183 (*LP*, XIV. ii, app. 45), cited by Elton, *Policy and Police*, pp. 159–60.

It is important to emphasize that this dissolution was carried through by persuasions and intimidation. In 1536 the commissioners dissolving the smaller monasteries were acting on the authority of a statute recently enacted by parliament and approved by the king. No such act empowered the commissioners in 1538, 1539 and 1540. The statute of 1539 did not dissolve any monastery. It declared that the surrender of abbeys by their abbots and convents was legal and it dealt with the consequences of surrenders; if a monastery was surrendered to the king, all existing obligations, for example the rents that tenants on monastic lands had to pay, would be upheld. That act was simply a technical measure ratifying what had been done.<sup>55</sup> Why did Henry proceed in this way? Perhaps because it was politically safer. Bringing a bill before parliament risked focusing attention. The act dissolving smaller monasteries had met with opposition when commissioners were sent out to enforce it. So stealth and pressures seemed a more effective way. If a monastery 'voluntarily' surrendered, it would be harder to mobilize opposition. That may in part explain why there was none, so far as we know, in parliament to this act. And such an approach had the advantage of flexibility. If an abbot demurred he could be left alone for the time being and pressed again later. If, however, there had been far more widespread resistance, it would have been possible for the king to yield without too much loss of face. There is little reason to doubt that by the end of 1537 Henry wanted the complete dissolution of the monasteries, but if, say, only half the religious houses had yielded to pressure, no one would have been able to point to an announced policy which had failed; Henry could have accepted such an outcome as vindicating his criticisms and desire for reform. As things turned out, persuasions and pressures worked. The fate of the abbots of Glastonbury, Reading and Colchester shows how hopeless resistance would have been. Maybe if all the abbots had refused – but it is easy to see why they did not. Some abbots, monks and nuns may have welcomed the chance to be released from their vows, but few had availed themselves of this earlier in the decade. Most responded pragmatically: what could they do?

Henry VIII's increasing hostility to monasteries had thus carried him forward from reform to dissolution. Opposition to his policies from the Observant Franciscans and the Carthusians had sharpened his scepticism, opposition from the Pilgrims of Grace had turned scepticism into hatred. But if political considerations were the trigger for the final dissolution, there was more to it than that.

When in the years 1538 to 1540 commissioners were sent out to persuade abbots of the larger monasteries to surrender their monasteries, they required heads of religious houses to make legally dubious transfers, signing deeds of transfer which included the words 'voluntarily' and

<sup>55</sup> 31 Henry VIII, c.13 (*Statutes of the Realm*, iii. 733–9).

'spontaneously'.<sup>56</sup> But they went further, some tantalizing survivals suggest. The Greyfriars of Aylesbury, Bedford, Coventry, Reading and Stamford, and the Whitefriars of Stamford all signed very similar, though not exactly identical, denunciations of their past way of life.<sup>57</sup> Comparable denunciations of monasticism survive from two monasteries, Bittlesden in Buckinghamshire,<sup>58</sup> and St Andrew's in Northamptonshire.<sup>59</sup> It is possible that these surviving declarations are all that there ever were, and that only these friaries and religious houses were so troubled. But that seems unlikely. The declarations are standardized, strongly suggesting that they were drawn up by the government and simply presented to the friars and monks to subscribe. Had they been spontaneous they would surely have been much more varied. Deeds of surrender by religious houses survive in large numbers. These were vital legal documents and no doubt they were stored with care. By contrast the denunciations would have no such lasting importance. That for St Andrew's Priory, Northampton, is dated 1 March 1538 (though the surviving manuscript is plainly a later copy); the deed of surrender is dated 2 March. Does that reflect the process of surrender: first, an abject statement of submission, then the surrender itself? There is no obvious reason why St Andrew's, Northampton, or Bittlesden, the other monastery for which such a denunciation survives, should have been singled out. Most probably some such declaration was subscribed by all monasteries. As they were manifestly drawn up by the king's councillors, they were not a true reflection of what monks, nuns or friars felt. And these declarations, with their principled rejection of the religious life, throw intriguing light on the religious motivations underlying the dissolution.

At Bittlesden Abbey, Buckinghamshire, Abbot Richard Green and the convent admitted that:<sup>60</sup>

the manner and trade of lyving which we and others of owre pretensyde relygyon haue practysyde and vsyd many dayes, dothe most princypally consyst yn certayne dome [dumb] ceremonies and yn certayne constytutions of the bysshoppe off Rome and other forynsycall potentates as the abbot off Cystuus [Cîteaux] . . . and nott towght in the trew knowlege off Gods lawe by procuryng allwayes exemptyons off the bysshoppes off Rome from owr ordynaries and dyocyesans submytting owrselffes princypally to forynsycall potentattes and powers which neuer came here to reforme suche dysorder of lyvyng and abuses as now haue be fownde to

<sup>56</sup> TNA, PRO, E322/2, E322/127, for examples.

<sup>57</sup> The Greyfriars of Aylesbury (TNA, PRO, E322/10; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 611; *LP*, XIII. ii. 501), Bedford (TNA, PRO, E322/19; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 610–11), Coventry (TNA, PRO, E322/62; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 611), Reading (TNA, PRO, E322/279; copy drawn on by *LP*, XIII. ii. 340) and Stamford (TNA, PRO, E322/223; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 611; this is example III in *Eighth Report of the Deputy Keeper of Public Records* (1847), app. II, p. 4); and the Whitefriars of Stamford (TNA, PRO, E322/224; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 612; *LP*, XIII. ii. 565).

<sup>58</sup> TNA, PRO, E322/22 (*LP*, XIII. ii. 421; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 610–11).

<sup>59</sup> TNA, PRO SP1/129, fos. 143–7 (*LP*, XIII. i. 396).

<sup>60</sup> TNA, PRO, E322/22 (*LP*, XIII. ii. 421; Rymer, *Foedera*, xiv. 610–11). No deed of surrender appears to survive from Biddlesden.

haue raynyde amonge vsse And therefore now assuredlye knowyng that the most perfytt way of lyving is moste princypally and suffyciently declaryde vnto vsse by owre master Criste his evangelistes and apostles and that yt is most expedyentt for vsse to be gouernyde and orderde by our supreme hedd vnder godd the kynges moste noble grace.

Note the emphasis on the king's royal supremacy and the continuing denunciations of papal authority; but note too the dismissal of 'certain dumb ceremonies'.

The prior and convent of St Andrews, Northampton, professed, at great length, their contrition for the enormities of their past living, which had been, and was still, very different from the intention of the king's predecessors, their founders. Since they were unable to live as they ought, they begged the king to accept their free gift, and to be charitable towards them.<sup>61</sup>

beinge steryd by the gryffe of our conscience vnto greate contricion for the manyfolde negligonces enormytes and abuses of longe tyme by vs and other our predecessors vnder the pretence and shadowe of perfight religion vsed and comytted to the grevous displeasure of almightie god, the craftie decepcion and subtell seduccion of the pure and simple myndes of the good crustyan people of this yor graces noble realme, knowlegen our selves to have greuously offended god and yor highnes our soveraigne lord and founder, aswell in corruptinge the conscience of yor good cristian subiectes with vayne supersticions and other vnprofitable ceremonyes the very meanes and playne induccions to the abhomynable synne of idolatry.

Note here the allusion to 'the pretence and shadow of perfect religion', the admission that they had been involved in 'the crafty deception and subtle seduction' of the pure and simple good Christian people, corrupting them 'with vain superstitions and other unprofitable ceremonies', leading the king's good subjects to idolatry. They had spent the revenues of their house neither on virtuous exercise and study nor on charity to the poor nor on hospitality but rather they had taken on themselves simply the 'outward vesture' of their rule only 'to leade our liffes in an idell quyettes' and had used their income to feed their 'voluptuous and carnal appetites'. They had persuaded the people 'to dead images and counterfeited relics for damnable lucre'. And they subscribed this declaration 'now revolving dayly and contynuallie ponderinge in our sorowfull hartes and thereby perseiving the botomlas gulfe of everlastinge fyre to devoure vs' if persisting in this state of living.

They begged the king's pardon for their offences, omissions and negligences. They noted how the king, as supreme head of the church next after Christ in his realm of England, was 'the generall and onely reformatore of all religious persons' and had full authority to correct or to dissolve all religious houses at his pleasure. He had held back in the hope that they would amend themselves but now, so that no one in future

<sup>61</sup> TNA, PRO SP1/129, fos. 143–7 (*LP*, XIII. i. 396).



would in future be ‘abused with suche fayned devocion and devillishe persuacions vnder the pretext or habite of religion by vs’ and ‘that the said possessions and goodes shoulde be no longer vaynly consumed and synfully devoured or longer restrayned from a better or more necessary employment’ they humbly beseeched the king

that it might lieke yor maiestie for the discharginge and exoneratinge vs of the most grevous bourden of our payned consciens to the immynent parell and daunger of our dampnacion that we shoulde be in if by persisting in the state that we nowe rest in, we shoulde be the lett of a more godly and necessary imployment, gracyously to accept our free gifte with ought coercion persuacion or procurement of any creature lyving other then our voluntary free will

of all the possessions of the monastery. And they ended by insisting that all this was done voluntarily ‘withowght any compulcion or inducement other then of our owne proper consciens’.

Even more pointed denunciations were signed by friars, mocking friars’ habits. The ‘verye trew waye off perfection’ was sufficiently to be found in the ‘moste holsome doctrine off chryste his euangelistes and apostoles and after declared by the holy fathers in the primitive church of chryste’. It did not consist

in the tradytyon or inventyon off mens wytt yn weryng of a grey black whytt of any other coloryd garment cloke frokke or cowe in gurdyng our selves vpon our outward garments with gurdelles full of knottes or in lyke peculiar manner off papistycall ceremonies sequestryng our selvis from the vnyforme laudable and conformable manner of lyving off all other christen men vsyd many yerys from the beginning off cristes religion.

They were now being criticized for hypocrisy, dissimulation and superstition.<sup>62</sup>

The invocation of superstitions draws attention to another important religious dimension of these events. A central part of the dissolution of the larger houses was the dismantling of pilgrimage shrines and the ending of the practice of pilgrimage. Pilgrimages were of course made to a great many sacred places. It is striking, nonetheless, how many monasteries, and especially how many of the larger monasteries, were centres of pilgrimage. In the visitation of 1534-35 attention was already drawn to the prevalence of what was termed superstition by the visitors. In 1538 that was intensified. Imagine the royal commissioners sent to secure the surrender of religious houses, commissioners who were above all ruthless men of business, but men who fully shared that erasmian scepticism about the monastic life as it was lived. Once a monastery had surrendered, one of their tasks was to take possession of its buildings and goods. Unavoidably that included any pilgrimage shrines. What they found they viewed through their sceptical erasmian spectacles, but it

<sup>62</sup> TNA, PRO, E322/279 (*LP*, XIII. ii. 340). Cf. n. 57 above.



often reads as if even they, hard-bitten and cynical administrators, were taken aback by the superstitions they uncovered. And, encouraged by the king, they publicized, in bonfires and ceremonies, what they presented as idolatry. When Boxley Priory, Kent, surrendered in January 1538, the rood of grace was examined, dismantled and denounced as a fraud on market day at Maidstone. Much the same happened at the shrine at Bury St Edmunds (January/February), the rood at Bermondsey Abbey (May), the images of Our Lady from Ipswich and from Walsingham (July), the image of Our Lady from Caversham (September) and the blood of Hailes, presented as duck's blood or wax or gum in October.<sup>63</sup> The dissolution of the monasteries was justified on the grounds that they were centres of shameless superstition. Cynical the commissioners may have been, but there is little reason to doubt that they, and the king, fully and sincerely believed this.

Henry VIII is too often presented as essentially conservative and his break with Rome having simply produced 'Catholicism without the pope'. That strikes me as quite inadequate. Henry's Catholicism was Catholicism without the pope, without monasteries and without pilgrimages. Henry remained devoutly attached to the mass and continued to believe in the benefits of intercessory prayer: what he had already rejected was devotion to individual saints. And what the commissioners itemized as they dealt with the buildings and property of surrendered monasteries only reinforced the king's convictions. All that suggests that ideology was central and that the dissolution in intention and in consequences was much more than a smash-and-grab raid. The demolition of shrines and the exposure of relics reveal religious rather than material motivation. So do the documents which monks and friars were required to subscribe denouncing their past way of life as false. By 1540 no one could have been in any doubt that Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell and the commissioners who enforced policy believed both that monasteries implicitly and often openly challenged the king's supremacy over the church and that their practice reflected a dangerously misguided view of how God should be served. If Henry's methods were tyrannical, his religious convictions, whatever we think of them, were, I suggest, genuine and sincerely held, not a cloak for greed. That was why no compromise was possible and why by 1540 the monasteries were no more.

<sup>63</sup> Boxley (Kent): *LP*, XIII. i. 173, 195, PRO SP1/129, fos. 12–12v (*LP*, XIII. i. 231), fo. 89 (*LP*, XIII. i. 339), *LP*, XIII. i. 348, 754; *Wriothesleys Chronicle*, ed. W. Hamilton (2 vols., Camden Society, cxvi, 1875), i. 74–6; *Camden Miscellany*, *Camden Society*, lxxiii (1859), pp. 11–12). Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk): *LP*, XIII. i. 192. Bermondsey: *Wriothesley, Chronicle*, i. 77. Ipswich and Walsingham: *Wriothesley, Chronicle*, i. 83; *LP*, XIII. i. 1376, 1407, 1501. Caversham (Oxfordshire): *LP*, XIII. ii. 328. Hales (Gloucestershire): *Wriothesley, Chronicle*, i. 75–6, 90; *LP*, XIII. ii. 347, 409, 709, 710.