

# Reviews in History

Published on: *Reviews in History* (<https://reviews.history.ac.uk>)

---

## **A Religion of the Word: The Defence of the Reformation in the Reign of Edward VI**

**Review Number:** 295  
**Publish Date:** Tuesday, 1 October, 2002  
**Author:** Catharine Davies  
**ISBN:** 9780719057304  
**Date of Publication:** 2002  
**Price:** £  
**Pages:** 288pp.  
**Publisher:** Manchester University Press  
**Publisher URL:** <http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk>  
**Place of Publication:** Manchester  
**Reviewer:** Lucy Wooding

This book would have been a valuable addition to the historical literature on the English Reformation at any time, but its publication now is particularly timely, as the Reformation debate begins to focus on early English Protestantism with a set of questions previously unasked. Once upon a time sixteenth-century Protestantism needed no minute dissection of the sort provided by Catherine Davies, because the assumption was that we knew what it involved, just as we knew how successful it was. Much of the research of the last twenty years or so has been devoted to questioning whether it was indeed as successful as once thought, and although this issue is still unresolved, we are now also beginning to question whether we understand the nature of English Protestantism as well as we used to think. In general, the Reformation debate seems to have moved on from evaluating the relative success of Catholicism or Protestantism to the much more interesting question of what, more precisely, both of those identities involved. This book provides a thematic survey of the printed material produced by Protestant reformers during the reign of Edward VI. Its detailed, impartial and thoughtful treatment of the ideas deployed by a wide range of sources gives an unprecedented insight into the mentality of those who defended the Edwardian Reformation, and thus a valuable entry into the impassioned and fast-changing world of English Protestantism.

The relationship between Protestantism and print was a very special one. Although everyone in the sixteenth century was becoming aware of the potential of the printed word, Davies argues that it was the early Protestants who made most conscious use of it to spread what was, for many, 'a religion of the word'. The reign of Edward VI was of particular importance in the development of this special relationship, as English Protestantism moved from being largely clandestine to being a central aspect of royal identity and government policy. This shift sets up the first of the fascinating

tensions which Davies' book so carefully analyses; Protestant literature was now giving expression to both official propaganda, and to autonomous, independent expressions of religious zeal. Books could command and instruct in line with government policy, but they could also preach and prophesy in ways which evaded official control and might well be critical of the regime. Davies argues that we need to recognize 'the tension which existed between their new-found acceptance and support from the political elite, and their desire to distance themselves from actions taken by that elite in the name of the reformation'. This tension may account, at least in part, for the extensive range of styles and approaches which Davies points out within the sources she has used, outlining, for example, the contrast between the controversial, the didactic and the primarily entertaining. It is made clear that even within these groups there was extensive variation in approach, a wide array of themes, some idiosyncrasy, and even some outright conflict.

The author's stated aim, however, is to hold back from attempting any explicit classification of these sources, and although, as she admits, this 'risks downplaying the differences in background and approach of the authors', it is an approach which in many ways works well. This book seeks not to characterize, or to justify Protestant ideology, so much as to explore its literary manifestations with an open mind. Davies is therefore more open to exploring diversity where others have felt the need to prove homogeneity in Protestant thought. She gives equal attention to what have been considered the 'negative' as well as the 'positive' aspects of Protestant thought. She does continue to use the term 'Protestant', but an author's note at the start is careful to point out that this was not the term used by the Edwardian authors to refer to themselves, and her justification for employing the term as a convenient organizing category seems reasonable enough. Problems of terminology, after all, lie less in the terms themselves than in the assumptions which lie behind those terms, and Davies is clear-sighted in her approach to those old assumptions.

The introductory chapter of this book is a brisk and perceptive analysis of the various historical debates concerning Edward VI's reign. It deals clearly and convincingly with some rather tired issues of crisis versus continuity, the notion that Protestantism was about social progress, and the reputations of Edward and his chief ministers. The suggestion is not merely that the model of 'mid-Tudor crisis' is clearly outworn, but that we should be more interested in what contemporary perceptions of crisis say about the Protestant critique of reform and the prophetic and providentialist elements within Protestant discourse. Davies thinks Geoffrey Elton was wrong to dismiss the idea of a 'commonwealth party' out of hand; the identity of the commonwealth men may have been disparate, but that is not to say the individuals so identified were incapable of making important reflections on social and economic matters. She deals judiciously with the case that these seven years constituted a religious revolution; there is much to be said on both sides of the case, but with regard to the authors studied here, it is important to recognize that 'triumph over the destruction of the old piety and their celebration of the end of the Mass was always qualified by disillusion and foreboding'. The assessments are both balanced and detailed, and a good introduction to the issues at stake.

Chapter 1 then deals with that aspect of Edwardian Protestantism which is not usually prioritized, namely its anti-popery. This is a conscious decision, because anti-Catholic propaganda 'has too often been either ignored or dismissed as the regrettably bigoted face of Protestantism'. It allows an appreciation of the fact that anti-Catholicism was not an unchanging phenomenon; by Edward's reign earlier themes such as the opposition to the papacy and purgatory, and issues of justification by faith alone, had been replaced by a concentration on the Mass, and the issue of clerical celibacy. Davies identifies certain literary forms which were put to use in the campaign against popery. Some of these seem unsurprising, such as the portrayal of Catholicism as a tyranny over both body and soul, or the depiction of a disorder which embraced everything from the alleged obscurity of Catholic theology to the of sexual disfunction of its priests and religious. The anticlerical tropes

which could be employed in so many different ways were here put to use by the Edwardian writers to accuse the Catholic clergy of perpetrating a conspiracy to preserve their domination.

But perhaps most interesting of all is the way that the fundamental dichotomy between the two faiths was in many ways a literary construct, born of the need to emphasise the distance between the reformers and the papists whilst at the same time denying any charge of schism. There were many layers to this, the most important of which were the oppositions between scripture and human learning, between light and darkness, between spirit and flesh, and between the true and false churches. Thus the Reformation distinction between creeds which we tend to think of as automatic, is portrayed as something carefully manufactured in the interests of Protestant propaganda. Davies concludes that antipopery 'allowed protestants of varying theological types to fight together in the same war, and present a united front'.

Chapter 2 looks at how the Edwardian writers confronted the enemy on the other wing, namely the religious radicals. Davies thinks that the significance of Anabaptism far outweighed its otherwise rather limited presence in Edwardian England, and that the seemingly disproportionate amount of propaganda aimed at discrediting radicalism should tell us more about how anxious these writers were to prove their orthodoxy, and their claim to 'right order' in both church and state. This chapter gives some fascinating glimpses of the more heterodox ideas in circulation at the time, as well as elucidating the endeavours of those who attacked the radicals to demonstrate their respectability. Their attempt to depict Anabaptists and papists as essentially alike, different facets of the same false religion opposing the true church, was perhaps not as successful as they wanted it to be. It was far easier to conceal what they had in common with the Catholics than to disguise the common ground they shared with more radical Protestants. But since the main target of this propaganda was really the conservatives, this was perhaps unimportant; this campaign was an opportunity for the reformers to acquire a veneer of conservatism all their own. As Davies concludes, 'if such radicals had not existed, it would have been necessary to invent them, and that, to a great extent was what protestants did'.

Having explored the ways in which these Protestant writers defined themselves in opposition to Catholics and radicals, the book then turns to the more positive aspects of Protestant self-definition, and how they perceived themselves within the various contexts of church, commonwealth, and history. Chapter 3 deals with the reform of the church, for which the English Bible was the foundation, its supreme authority the touchstone for all religious opinion. Access to that Bible was both personal and institutional: 'the reformation was both the sum of a host of individual conversions and the means by which they could happen'. The chapter examines a number of contrasting elements within the ideas of the time. To many the only church of importance was the 'invisible church', and this was reflected in much of the literature, yet at the same time these writers were struggling to shape and direct the fledgling national church which they saw as failing them in many important ways. There were various pieces of advice being given towards the solution of those problems. With, for example, the problem of an obviously inadequate body of clergy, we find Crowley threatening independent action, Latimer railing against indifference, Foxe as a lone voice advocating a ministry based on forgiveness, and Joye demanding stronger moral discipline. Differing attitudes could sometimes escalate into more violent clashes, such as Foxe and Joye disagreeing over the boundaries between civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction, or the unresolved problem of episcopacy. Yet these writers shrank from advocating a wholesale reform of the church, clinging to the structures that were familiar even as they despaired over their inadequacies. Here the role of the monarch was crucial: this Reformation owed too much to the Royal Supremacy to risk questioning its future role.

Davies sees little clear idea of the visible church in the writings of the time, and surprisingly little comment on how corporate public worship should be ordered, beyond the indications given by the

two Books of Common Prayer. This, she implies, was because to clarify such points as this might have involved venturing into the dark waters of more sweeping structural change. Reformers took refuge instead in ideas of prophecy: 'the prophetic impulse needed no official sanction'. But they remained uneasy about admonishing too vigorously the authorities on whom they relied for official sanction as preachers. The result was an 'uneven picture of the church', which whilst it could exalt the role of the ministry, was still unclear about its understanding of the Christian congregation: it could direct the few, but held back from trying to order the many.

Davies sees a strong compensation for this weakness in the idea of the godly commonwealth. The implication seems to be that since these reformers did not want to challenge the Royal Supremacy, they sought instead to make it the linchpin of their vision of a godly future. The social hierarchy, with the monarch at its head, balanced the obligations of obedience on the one hand with those of justice and charity on the other. So the reformers sought to link traditional hierarchical models - the cosmos, the family and the body - to Protestant ideology, and thereby create an ideal of the godly commonwealth which could draw on traditional social patterns as a sanction for a reformed theology. In this the idea of the godly magistrate assumed a new importance, the doctrine of Christian obedience was re-emphasised, and exhortations to both justice and charity were linked, to proffer 'a vision which reflected both the law, giving each his due, and the Gospel, loving one another'. Davies argues that the social and political criticism often associated with the Edwardian regime was not a separate 'commonwealth' ideology, but a corollary of this vision of the godly commonwealth, being chiefly a lament when it became clear that its objectives had not been achieved. Political and religious ideologies, far from separating, were here becoming even more closely intertwined.

The final chapter seeks to evaluate how these reformers perceived their own place in history, and how they understood both the dictates of the past and the possibilities for the future. It takes issue with those who have taken the frequently pessimistic elements of Edwardian Protestant propaganda literally, and used them to construct the model of 'mid-Tudor crisis'. Instead, Davies argues convincingly that the many expressions of an apparently pessimistic nature only make sense if understood in the context of contemporary ideas about providence and prophecy. If success was taken as a sign of God's support, then Edward's accession initially seemed to suggest that God was favouring England; but the reversals and difficulties experienced after 1549 rather suggested that God's wrath was being felt instead. Even so, the gloom was not unremitting; there was both hope and fear side by side. But since the reformers had also taken on the obligations of prophecy, it was up to them to make clear the possible doom that awaited the nation if it did not heed their warnings. Yet if their prophecies were intended to engender anxiety in their audience, they could also engender confidence among the reformers themselves, giving them a clear framework for understanding their plight on the basis of obvious biblical models. Moreover, since disaster was a clear indication of the proximity of the last days, and belief in the imminent end of the world was widespread among these reformers, their so-called 'pessimism' could in fact be taken as an indication of their own imminent triumph. As with so many of the themes which Davies has so painstakingly detailed, these ideas have to be placed in the wider context of the Edwardian Protestant mentality, if they are to be properly understood.

The great merit of this book is its non-partisan explanation of a range of ideas and polemics, exposing the good, the bad and the ugly aspects within Edwardian Protestantism. It tries to steer clear of over-confident assertions concerning the overall nature of Protestant identity, and it also corrects the tendency to emphasise the 'acceptable' face of Protestantism, such as its concern with social justice and reform, over less attractive aspects such as its rabid antipopery. More than anything, it supplies a wealth of carefully nuanced detail, which renders any glib characterizations impossible. It is an assessment defined by its even-handedness. This balanced approach is at the

same time extremely welcome, and yet at times just slightly frustrating. Whilst thoroughly applauding Davies' moderation, it would still be good at times to hear her own conclusions come through with more conviction.

There are points, also, when it could perhaps be said that Davies slips back into a more secure world where 'Protestantism' as a term needed no explanation. In particular, she seems at times to over-emphasise the extent to which Protestant ideology was a single, coherent and harmonious creed, an implication which does not appear entirely consistent with the evidence deployed. Davies argues that, despite all the examples she adduces of conflicts and ambiguities within the ideas of Edwardian Protestants, 'the characteristics they had in common outweighed those that separated them', and she finds them as a body 'remarkably united'.

This is perhaps still a matter of interpretation. If it is true that they all shared a dedication to Scripture, an anxiety to see the restoration of social order, and a desire to return to the primitive church, then that may delineate less Protestant identity than merely sixteenth-century academic preoccupations, since the same could be said of so many of their Catholic contemporaries, whose printed works are also caught up in scriptural and patristic authority, and a concern for the fragmentation of the commonwealth. And if divisions between these Protestants had more to do with 'political circumstance and incompatibility of character', why must such sources of division qualify as less important than purely theological disagreements? Reformations could not separate out their reforming impulses from the political mechanisms or personal initiatives by which they hoped to achieve them.

The evidence so carefully and beautifully deployed by Davies might be said to make a case for rather more diversity within Edwardian attitudes than she always allows. It could also be said that any evidence of outright conflict between reformers is given perhaps slightly less attention than is its due. The chapter on the religious radicals is by far the shortest in the book, and a comparison with Tom Freeman's recent piece on the freewillers in Peter Marshall's and Alec Ryrie's collection of essays, *The Beginnings of English Protestantism* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2002), shows just how much more there is to be said here. The diversity which does get acknowledged is in any case not allowed to detract from what Davies sees as a largely coherent body of ideas. It is argued, for example, that 'there was always a tension in protestant thinking between the imperative for the government to act to complete the reformation and the inability of 'worldly' policy to fulfil the task'. For Davies, however, this was purely a creative tension. Similarly, the encounters with the more radical aspects of Protestantism are held to have reinforced the boundaries of Edwardian orthodoxy, rather than undermined them. Uncertainties are seen as an acceptance of the limitations of the reformers' situation. She argues that 'acceptance of the impurity of the visible church was not necessarily a polemical weakness ... by emphasising the mixed nature of the church, protestants were accepting a reality which they found both in the Gospels and in contemporary hostility to the reformation'. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that what did or did not constitute a 'polemical weakness' cannot really be adjudged at this distance. Davies plays down the conflict, the division, the tension between the ideals of an invisible church and the painful failures of the visible church. Whether contemporaries came away with the same overall appreciation of Protestant harmony, homogeneity and purpose is harder to say.

For Davies, the Protestant ideology of the Edwardian Reformation was something quintessentially English. Acknowledging the deference of the English reformers towards some of the great continental figures, and the active interventions made by Martyr, Bucer, Bullinger and Lasco, she remains unconvinced that this marked a 'continental phase' for the English reformation. There was a 'consciousness that all reformers were participating in a movement which was going to transform Christendom', but little more than that. This is a judgement, however, that perhaps requires additional evidence, beyond the scope of this book, to be entirely convincing. Davies has supplied a

formidable analysis of the English material, but there is surely much more to be said concerning its European context. The conclusion hints at a reluctance to dwell on theological disagreements which has led the author to concentrate on the particular English circumstances in which the Edwardian Reformation was hatched, thus emphasising the unity produced by those circumstances. 'The pressures created by these problems created more of a consensus than would emerge from a study which focuses on theological differences'. Perhaps a slightly different approach might have called into question the picture of unanimity which Davies has given us. Yet even if these conclusions do not command instant agreement, they do command respect.

It is only too easy to reduce Reformation convictions to a bare outline dangerously at risk of caricature. This kind of book is our best defence against that, and Davies does an excellent job. She says at the outset that this book 'is not so much intended to put a new piece of the historical jigsaw in place as to show a shifting configuration of the historical kaleidoscope - the reformation seen through protestant eyes'. She has clearly succeeded in this aim. There were other facets to the Edwardian Protestant experience, and it could be argued that she might have given slightly more consideration to continental influences from abroad and divisions between reformers back home. The concluding emphasis upon Protestant unity and consensus could undoubtedly be challenged. Nonetheless, this is a superb addition to the literature on this fascinating subject, and an invaluable guide to the intricacies of English Protestant thought.

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/295-2/>

**Links:**

[1]

[https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/a-religion-of-the-word-the-defence-of-the-reformation-in-t  
he-reign-of-edward-vi/](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/reviewed-item/a-religion-of-the-word-the-defence-of-the-reformation-in-the-reign-of-edward-vi/)