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# WILLS AS EVIDENCE OF A 'REFORMATION FROM BELOW' IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

William Marshall

*Some have claimed that the Reformation was largely imposed 'from above' on an unwilling nation, but this article demonstrates, through a methodologically-careful study of people's wills, that it had a swift and profound effect on people from all walks of life.*

## Introduction: Why should I care about sixteenth-century wills?

In a recent blog post, Lee Gatiss considers some “threats to the Reformation heritage of the Church of England.”<sup>1</sup> The historical debates surrounding the Reformation have a significant bearing on this, since one can mount a much stronger argument for the continuing validity of Reformed theology and practices within today’s church if the Reformation is seen as having been a vital, widespread movement of church renewal than if it is portrayed as being imposed on a largely unwilling populace and only accepted over time out of habit. The viewpoint labelled ‘Reformation from below’ argues that Protestantism quickly gained widespread support throughout England, becoming a popular movement whose impetus came as much from the convictions of ordinary people,<sup>2</sup> i.e., from ‘below,’ as from royal directives. According to this narrative, “Protestantism grew slowly 1530–1547, but blossomed under Edward VI, and by the beginning of Mary’s reign in 1553 it was ‘seemingly ineradicable’.”<sup>3</sup>

Eamon Duffy, however, argues against the view that the common folk of England had little attachment to the beliefs and practices of an elitist church, and thus soon abandoned them *en masse* for the new teachings.<sup>4</sup> In *The Stripping of the Altars*, he aims to portray the “range and vigour of late medieval and early modern English Catholicism” and the deep

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<sup>1</sup> L. Gatiss, “Formulary Friday: Undermining the Reformation,” *The Church Society Blog*, 27 November 2015, [http://churchsociety.org/blog/entry/formulary\\_friday\\_undermining\\_the\\_reformation/](http://churchsociety.org/blog/entry/formulary_friday_undermining_the_reformation/).

<sup>2</sup> Following common usage, phrases like ‘ordinary people,’ ‘common folk,’ etc., are used to mean those outside the upper social and economic classes.

<sup>3</sup> M. Todd, Introduction to Dickens’ article, *Reformation to Revolution: Politics and Religion in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1995), 157.

<sup>4</sup> E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars* (London: Yale University Press, 1992), 2.

engagement of the populace.<sup>5</sup> The Reformation is seen as mainly imposed on an unwilling people, only gaining widespread acceptance after several decades due to pressure ‘from above.’<sup>6</sup>

But how can the beliefs of these common people be gauged? In the sixteenth century, the only personal document produced by those outside of the educated elite was their will. Given the custom of the time, to begin with a bequest of the testator’s soul as a religious preamble, before provision for their material goods, the will was their one chance to make a written record of their faith.<sup>7</sup> In *Lollards and Protestants*, Dickens first drew scholarly attention to religious preambles by using an observed shift in what was written to demonstrate the growth of Protestant belief.<sup>8</sup> Before the Reformation, the soul was usually bequeathed to Almighty God, St. Mary the Virgin and the saints in heaven (with assorted variations).<sup>9</sup> There was always a small minority that omitted mention of Mary and the saints, but Dickens’ study of wills from the diocese of York shows the proportion of those doing so increasing significantly over the latter years of Henry VIII’s reign. Thus, whilst noting cautionary factors, Dickens concludes that this shows “some decline in the place occupied by their cults in the public mind.”<sup>10</sup>

A study of wills from Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire covering a broader span of years is published in more detail in Dickens, *The English Reformation*:<sup>11</sup>

Years	Traditional Wills	Non-traditional Wills
1538–40	70	9
1541–44	82	33
1545–46	99	32
1547	24	15
1548	24	19
1549	23	24
1550	18	31
1551	21	35

<sup>5</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 1–6.

<sup>7</sup> M. Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 320.

<sup>8</sup> A. G. Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509–1538*, 2nd ed. (London: Hambledon Press, 1982), esp. 171–172, 215–218.

<sup>9</sup> Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Dickens, *Lollards and Protestants*, 172.

<sup>11</sup> A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1964), 266.

Dickens believes, despite being aware of possible outside pressures on the testator, that this shift “does not fail to tell a story.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, from the 1530s, one begins to see examples of wills that do not merely eschew traditional wording but actively express Protestant sentiments, such as salvation only through Christ, and preambles of this type grow proportionally as time goes on.<sup>13</sup> Surely, here is proof of ‘Reformation from below’ in the words of the common people themselves?

Duffy, however, believes that those who make much of such patterns, fail to give sufficient weight to the “growing pressures” upon testators.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Spufford notes that “a man lying on this death bed must have been much in the hands of the scribe,”<sup>15</sup> and, given this and the wider societal changes with a bearing on these matters, Duffy reasonably sounds a note of caution against hastily drawn conclusions. For example, the lack of bequests to religious guilds or arrangements for intercessions in a sample of wills from 1550–1553 is hardly surprising, given that these guilds had been dissolved in 1547 and episcopal visitations had been attacking such practices.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, J. D. Alsop has noted the typically formulaic character of religious preambles, further casting doubt on their use as indicators of personal belief.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these objections, I now follow three avenues of inquiry, inspired by Spufford,<sup>18</sup> that support the validity of using wills to argue for ‘Reformation from below,’ and also point to fruitful areas for further study in this field. The shift away from Catholic sentiments and towards Reformed sentiments in wills in the early-mid-sixteenth century has already been demonstrated beyond doubt; the debate is over the significance of this shift. My aim is to show that, when used appropriately, will preambles can provide substantial insights into the personal religious beliefs of ordinary people, and thereby show that the studies already done do indeed show the Reformation to have been a widespread, popular movement.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 266.

<sup>13</sup> Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 267.

<sup>14</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 508.

<sup>15</sup> M. Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and their Influence,” *Local Population Studies* 7 (1971): 30.

<sup>16</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 504.

<sup>17</sup> J. D. Alsop, “Religious Preambles in Early Modern English Wills as Formulae,” *JEH*, 40, no. 1 (1989): 19–27.

<sup>18</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills.”

<sup>19</sup> Therefore, some of the wills studied both by myself and secondary sources to which I refer do not come from the early-mid-sixteenth century, since I am making general points about will preambles, which I then apply to show that studies of

## To what degree can the individual voice of the testator be heard in preambles?

In her study of a series of seventeenth century wills from Orwell, Spufford observes that Nicholas Johnson scribed six wills between 1614 and 1626, with near identical clauses concerning the soul.<sup>20</sup> However, the common use of formulae makes deviation from them all the more noticeable, and Spufford believes that indications of individual belief can be detected where these deviations occur. She notes twelve wills scribed by the Rector, William Barnard, between 1615 and 1642.<sup>21</sup> Eleven of these followed a clear formula with slight variations, but one, of Richard Flatt, was unique. He bequeathed his soul;

“Into the hands of God Almighty, my maker, my saviour and Redeemer, trusting to be saved by the only sufficient merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour ... when it shall please the lord in mercy to take me out of this world, being fully assured that this my mortal body shall one day put on immortality, and being raised again by the virtue of Christ’s resurrection, I shall live forever with him.”<sup>22</sup>

It is hard to dispute Spufford’s conclusion that, in this case, Flatt felt “sufficiently strongly for his opinions to come through clearly into his will.” She observes that such deviations are seen in any substantial series of wills from a village, and believes that these can reasonably be seen to reflect the testator’s own views.<sup>23</sup>

A study of wills from three Lincolnshire villages in the early 1530s provides some interesting examples of such individuality, whilst also giving a snapshot of will preambles just prior to the Henrician Reformation:<sup>24</sup>

Seven wills from Donnington-in-Holland all follow the same general pattern. Six are very similar, bequeathing the soul to ‘God almighty,’ ‘Our Lady Saint Mary’ (five adding ‘blessed’), and either to ‘all the saints,’ or

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early-Reformation era wills do indeed show what supporters of ‘Reformation from below’ say they show.

<sup>20</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 33.

<sup>21</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 33–34.

<sup>22</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 34, underlining is Spufford’s, indicating the unique elements of this preamble, with the rest being Barnard’s usual wording.

<sup>23</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 34.

<sup>24</sup> Source of wills: D. Hickman, ed., *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, Publications of the Lincoln Record Society, vol. 89 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001).

‘the holy company,’ ‘in heaven.’<sup>25</sup> The seventh, of Thomas Luffe, might carry his individual voice, reading; “Fyrste I bequethe my soule to God my maker, to Hys Mother St. Mary and to all saintes.”<sup>26</sup> Mentions of Mary as Mother of God occur in other nearby villages, such as in six out of fourteen wills in Gosberton.<sup>27</sup> But all six of these have almost identically worded preambles, suggesting that, in these cases, this was simply a set phrase used by one or more of the scribes in Gosberton. Luffe, however, is the only one of his village to break from a well used formula, and also the only one to mention God as his ‘maker.’ This becomes even more striking when compared with a series of fourteen wills from Kirton-in-Holland, all of which bequeath the ‘soul to God almighty, our Lady Saint Mary, and to all the celestial company of heaven.’<sup>28</sup> This shows that each village had one or more standard formulae, all based on the same ‘traditional’ pattern, and thus suggests that Luff’s dual deviations from the local formulae, small though they are, do reflect particular personal emphases of his faith.

Another noteworthy will is that of Godfrey Bolles of Gosberton, January 1533. Uniquely amongst the wills of these three series, he preceded the usual preamble with the assertion that he was “trustyng in God and in the sacraments off holy churche and thereby to be saved,” before making a typical bequest of his “soule to allmyghtty God, Our Lady St Mary and to all the celestiall cumpeny of heven.”<sup>29</sup> Here we hear the voice of an individual for whom the sacraments clearly held deep personal significance.

These two examples show that one does not need to look only for wills containing unusually long preambles for clear statements of personal belief; small but significant deviations from usual patterns are just as noteworthy and should not be overlooked. We have also seen how ubiquitous was the basic pattern of a bequest of the soul to God, Mary and the Saints. And two examples from the area from the fourteenth century show just how well established this pattern was, with both Avic

<sup>25</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, 11, 119–120, 234, 235–236, 250–251 & 254. Where primary-source material is quoted within single quote marks, the exact words of the testator are given but using modern spelling.

<sup>26</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, 299–300.

<sup>27</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, 280–281, 281–282, 318, 329, 338–339, 363–364 mention Mary as ‘mother’; 11, 98–100, 143, 204, 215–216, 302, 305–306, 313–314 do not.

<sup>28</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, 26, 67, 82–83, 95–96, 104–105, 148–149, 155–156, 163–164, 181–182, 225, 263–264, 274, 294, 298.

<sup>29</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, 98–100.

De Crosseby in 1327,<sup>30</sup> and Geoffry Le Scope in 1382,<sup>31</sup> bequeathing their souls to God, Mary and the Saints with minor variations. The formulae of the early 1530s were no recent innovation, but were expressions of a standard pattern with over two hundred years' pedigree. It is simply not credible that the general population mindlessly shifted away from this *en masse* over a couple of decades without at least considering the theological significance.

An interesting example of personal wording showing a shift away from the traditional pattern is present in a survey of three wills from Pontefract.<sup>32</sup> In 1521, the will of William Wakefield unsurprisingly follows the traditional pattern.<sup>33</sup> However, the 1543 will of his son, John, contained the striking preamble:

“I bequeathe my soull unto the handes of Almightye God my Maker, Creator and Redemer, trustinge unfenyddie to be savide throughe the merites of Christes gloriouse passion, and to be delyvered therbie from the captivitie and bondage of the devell, whom utterlie I defie with all my myght, strenght and power.”<sup>34</sup>

This was witnessed by the curate, William Chamber, who also witnesses the final will in this series, that of Marjorie Coners in 1547. Yet the preamble of her will simply read; “First I bequeathe my soule unto Almightye God, my Redemer and Savioure, and to the blisshed Virgine Marie.”<sup>35</sup> The phraseology in John Wakefield's will was certainly not something imposed by William Chamber on all his parishioners. Thus its distinctiveness marks it out as the words of the testator himself.<sup>36</sup> It therefore represents a significant shift of religious thought within a family in just one generation.

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<sup>30</sup> C. W. Foster, ed., *Lincoln Wills Registered in the District Probate Registry at Lincoln. Vol I. A.D. 1271 to A.D. 1526, Publications of the Lincoln Record Society*, vol. 5, (Lincoln: 1914), 5–7.

<sup>31</sup> Foster, *Lincoln Wills Vol I. 1271–1526*, 11–19.

<sup>32</sup> J. W. Clay, ed., *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, Publications of the Surtees Society, vol. 106, (Durham: 1902).

<sup>33</sup> Clay, *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, 3–4.

<sup>34</sup> Clay, *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, 179–180.

<sup>35</sup> Clay, *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, 256–257.

<sup>36</sup> And its early date, well before any reformist preamble formulae of such sophistication had been publicised.

Duffy might argue that there were external pressures against traditional practices in late Henrician England,<sup>37</sup> but it is unlikely that John Wakefield felt these pressures too strongly when his curate was happy to put his name to a will bequeathing the testator's soul to the 'blessed Virgin Mary' four years later. This is surely the will of a man who had conscientiously rejected the Catholic cult of the saints and accepted salvation through faith in the death of Christ. Duffy is of course right to point out that Catholics were not unaware that Christ was their saviour.<sup>38</sup> But, prior to the late 1530s, religious preambles did not show these emphases, however orthodox in Catholic doctrine, to be at the forefront of people's minds when considering the fate of their soul. There were various standard formulae and occasions where individual beliefs shone through these. But they only support the argument that "the cornerstone of pre-Reformation Catholicism was ... [that] good works and prayer could materially affect one's chances of salvation in the afterlife."<sup>39</sup> The shift from these being the centre of a person's religious thought to Christ's redeeming work being the primary thing in which John Wakefield entrusts his soul is profound.

Study of seven wills from a later period shows how individual wording may be discerned when Protestant formulae had developed. These wills, from Wrenbury village in the early seventeenth century, were all witnessed by at least one of two individuals, Thomas Grey and Thomas Harwar, and show the clear development of a standard formula for that village.

The first, of Randall Cowper in 1612, says; "First and principally I Comend my soule into the hands of almighty god hopeinge by the merits and bloodsheding of Jesus Christe to bee one of the number of those that shall bee made partakers of everlastinge Joy and felicitie."<sup>40</sup> These are typical sentiments for preambles of the period. The next, of John Wilkinson in 1615, expresses the same basic thoughts but with a development in the wording; "First, I Commende my soule into the hands of almighty god hopinge only by the bood Sheedinge of Jesus Christe my alone Savior to have free pardon and remission of all my sinns;" and the addition after the dedication of the body of "sure and certaine hope of the

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<sup>37</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 508.

<sup>38</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 509.

<sup>39</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532–1534*, xxii.

<sup>40</sup> P. B. Pixton, ed., *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, Publications of the Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, vol. 144 (Chester: 2009), 114–116.



Joyfull resurrecon.”<sup>41</sup> The next, of Randle Starkie in 1624,<sup>42</sup> uses similar wording, but lacks the phrase after the dedication of the body. The next three, however, Oliver Briscoe in 1625,<sup>43</sup> Emma Barnett in 1631,<sup>44</sup> and Margaret Grey in 1632,<sup>45</sup> all use the wording of John Wilkinson’s will almost verbatim, indicating that this was now a set formula in the village.

However, that of Elizabeth Briscoe, August 1632, is markedly different: “First I Commende my soule and body into the handes of Almyghty god assuredly trustinge and beleevinge to be saved and made partaker both soule and body of eternall blisse and happinesse through the onely merites of Christ Jesus my alone saviour and redeemer.”<sup>46</sup> This was written just months after that of Margaret Grey’s, with both Thomas Grey and Thomas Harwar in attendance as witnesses, so the distinctiveness clearly indicates it being Elizabeth’s own wording, demonstrating her personal beliefs.

Personal opinions, then, can be seen in wills with relatively concise formulae. However, more dramatic and lengthy examples do occur and, though rare, are worth noting for the strength and clarity of feeling expressed. In six wills from Gateshead spanning 1567 to 1571,<sup>47</sup> five are clearly formulaic. Three use a brief formula, in widespread use, bequeathing the soul ‘into the hands of almighty god, my only saviour and redeemer.’<sup>48</sup> Those of Allison Lawes, October 1570,<sup>49</sup> and Wiliam Dagg, December 1570,<sup>50</sup> are much longer and more sophisticated, but that only highlights their similarity.

In marked contrast to these, William Brown, 20 May 1567, leaves us in no doubt that these are his personal words, vehemently expressing his Reformed beliefs that

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<sup>41</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 132–133.

<sup>42</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 207–210.

<sup>43</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 232–234.

<sup>44</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 266–269.

<sup>45</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 273–275.

<sup>46</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 318–320.

<sup>47</sup> J. Raine, ed., *Wills and Inventories illustrative of the History, Manners, Language, Statistics, &c. of the Northern Counties of England from the Eleventh Century Downwards*, Publications of the Surtees Society, vol. 2 (Newcastle: Blackwell and co., 1835).

<sup>48</sup> Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 286–288, 301–302, 351–356.

<sup>49</sup> Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 326.

<sup>50</sup> Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 332–334.

“... ther is no sauio<sup>r</sup> no mediator nor advocat butt onlye Jesus Christ god and man & y<sup>e</sup> he allon by y<sup>e</sup> shedding of his most precus blodd haith pacyfied the wrath of god Justlye conceyved against man & that there is no sanctificac<sup>o</sup>n no remempc<sup>o</sup>n no<sup>r</sup> purgac<sup>o</sup>n of synne but onlye by the merits of the Christs deaith & passion & all other superstitions & feyned cattells onlye deuised to illud the symple and vlnerned as y<sup>e</sup> vile abuses of y<sup>e</sup> sea of Rome I vtterlye detest & abhore and as tuchinge my last will and testament ffyrst I bequeth my soull to almightie godd.”<sup>51</sup>

The fact that the actual bequest of Brown’s soul is of the briefest possible sort, coming right at the end of this polemic, highlights that it is obtuse of Alsop to argue that, because some wills express clear Christian devotion elsewhere yet have brief preambles, this shows that the preamble was added thoughtlessly.<sup>52</sup> Rather, these show people thinking carefully about their wills, and their religious expression within them, but simply not seeing the need to repeat themselves. Such instances do not weaken the evidence for ‘Reformation from below’ provided by preamble studies.

Large studies of Reformation era wills have tended only to note the general character of the preambles, presenting this information in succinct tables like those of Dickens. Only particularly dramatic examples, like William Brown’s, are quoted as matters of interest, but, given their rarity, these provide little support for ‘Reformation from below.’ However, it has been demonstrated from wills of various eras how individual phraseology can be found in much more modest deviations from formulae, and these show that at least a significant minority the populace were expressing personal faith in their wills. Much mileage might be found in a wide-scale study that seeks to analyse such examples of individual wording, presenting a much more detailed picture than has yet been attempted.

### How likely was the use of a formula to directly show the testator’s religious opinions?

Despite the fact that modest deviations from set formulae are far more frequent than those like William Brown’s, they are still the exceptions. Does this mean, then, that other wills shed no light whatsoever on the individual testator’s religious views? In considering this, it is instructive to

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<sup>51</sup> Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 272–273.

<sup>52</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 24.

return to the will of Richard Flatt.<sup>53</sup> Here was a man whose desire to make a unique personal statement was sufficiently strong so as to cause Barnard to add a significant amount of individual material to this preamble, while the other eleven he wrote were notable for their succinct conformity. Despite this, Flatt was content for his individual wording to be used around Barnard's standard wording. The use of formulae was accepted by Flatt as normal, but not something indicative of mindless parroting that he wished polemically to supplant by his personal phraseology. Rather, he was happy to use the formula as a basis for his personal declaration of faith, adding some extra heartfelt words. Or consider the examples, noted above, of Thomas Luffe and Godfrey Bolles.<sup>54</sup> Both wanted to individualise their preambles in order to express personal elements of their Catholic faith, but both were happy to mould their wording around the standard pattern. These instances show that the use of formulae is not necessarily contrary to individual expression.

Spufford's studies shed much light on this issue. She notes the four wills scribed by Neville Butler, who "wrote two wills which were neutral and simply bequeathed the soul to God that gave it but also two in identical wording when more appeared to be called for,"<sup>55</sup> in these cases stressing "the only merryt of my saviour Jesus Christ."<sup>56</sup> Therefore, the use of standard formulae does not remove the possibility of inferring something of the testator's convictions. Butler clearly did not just automatically add this to any will he wrote, and thus one would assume it was at the request of the testators that he added a specifically Protestant phrase. But in doing so he used a set formula, rather than original wording. To consider a modern analogy, no one considers the poems usually read at a funeral perfunctory or impersonal just because they have not been specially written for the occasion. Why, then, should we assume that testators using the words of another do so with no thought as to their meaning, especially during the Reformation, when the specifics of one's faith was a live issue?

Of particular interest to this discussion is an example noted by Alsop of the court proceedings regarding a contested will in 1591, in which the scribe, Thomas Pemberton, gives a detailed account of the process by which Edmund Winstanley's will was written.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly Alsop is

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<sup>53</sup> See Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 34, and material quoted above from that source.

<sup>54</sup> Hickman, *Lincoln Wills, 1532-1534*, 299-300, 98-100.

<sup>55</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 35.

<sup>56</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 35.

<sup>57</sup> Alsop, "Religious Preambles," 25-26.

correct that the account shows that Pemberton “wrote the entire preamble without the direction of the testator.”<sup>58</sup> However, this account does show the start of the preamble being discussed. As Pemberton starts to scribe, Winstanley asks, “where do you begin (In the name of God Amen)?” Pemberton then carefully checks that this is what the testator wants, asking in response, “will you begin there?” Winstanley clearly responds in the affirmative, asking rhetorically, “where shall I begin butt att the begening?”<sup>59</sup> And then Pemberton proceeds to write the preamble. Thus Winstanley made a specific point of checking that his scribe was starting with the preamble that begins ‘in the name of God, amen.’ Alsop is thus correct to observe that Winstanley, despite his infirmity, was “in control of the procedure ... [and] knew the opening formula for the will.”<sup>60</sup>

However, when Alsop then opines that Winstanley “did not consider [the preamble] something to which he should bring a personal statement of faith,”<sup>61</sup> he misses the point. It is of course correct that “this stands as a caution when assessing other testaments possessing distinctive phraseology and words to the effect, ‘I fullie beleeve’.”<sup>62</sup> We must not assume that any specifics are the direct words of the testator just because phrases like this are used, or the preamble is longer than average. Analysis of the type used above is needed to show individual wording. But the testator in this case was clearly aware of this formula and indicated that he would like it included in his will. Just because it is not a personally worded statement does not mean it does not indicate the nature of the person’s faith, any more than quoted readings at funerals should be seen as not expressing personal feelings.

There is another instance where the scribing process was recorded in detail, which is in court papers for the will of William Patrick of Chorley, 1600. The preamble was brief and conventional; “I bequeathe my soule into the hands of Almyghtye god my maker and onlie Redemer.”<sup>63</sup> In his statement to the court, the scribe records how, at the bidding of the ill testator, he wrote his will. Once he had completed this task, “hee dyd read the same to the said deceacent & hee lyked well of the same and dyd putt his seal [to ytt &] the [*sic*] signed the same with his marke.”<sup>64</sup> Although

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<sup>58</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 25–26.

<sup>59</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 25.

<sup>60</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 26.

<sup>61</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 26.

<sup>62</sup> Alsop, “Religious Preambles,” 26.

<sup>63</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 102.

<sup>64</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 103.

this statement does not include specific discussion of the preamble, it at least makes clear that the whole will was read back to the testator, who expressed his satisfaction with all of it. Whilst this tells us nothing about the strength of this individual's religious convictions, it at least suggests that he was not opposed to the form or theology of the preamble. A further example has been found by Zell, where, "in the case of William Hammon's will in 1543, a number of deponents later testified that the parish curate, Nicholas Unkley, wrote out the testament and then read it aloud to the sick testator and to his witnesses."<sup>65</sup>

Having noted just one case, Zell writes that "how often this happened will for ever remain a mystery."<sup>66</sup> But now three separate examples having been observed by Alsop, myself and Zell, and with the general care that one can reasonably assume was taken with these important legal documents, it must be supposed that attention to the exact wording shown in these examples was the rule and not the exception. There is no evidence to suggest that scribes were frequently adding preambles to wills without checking that the testator was happy with what was written. Therefore, confidence can be had that studies showing shifts towards increasing use of Protestant formulae in the middle decades of the sixteenth century are providing real evidence of 'Reformation from below.'

However, what of Duffy's argument that, although expressing Catholic sentiments was never forbidden during this period, there was growing ecclesiastical pressure against Catholic practices and beliefs?<sup>67</sup> Might not testators feel pressured by local clergy to hide their religious views where these went against the official line? Spufford argues against assuming that the influence of a community's religious authorities would blanket over any personal expression in the preambles. Her studies show that "the vicar, when he was present as a witness, and not as a scribe, was not necessarily deferred to over the form of the clause bequeathing the soul."<sup>68</sup> She notes Rev'd Davis, who "bequeathed his soul to 'Jesus Christ in faith in whom I hope undoubtedly to be saved'." Whilst one will that he witnessed contained a similar phrase, two others merely "had neutral clauses."<sup>69</sup> Davis clearly did not impose his own views over his parishioners' preambles.

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<sup>65</sup> M. Zell, "The Use of Religious Preambles as a Measure of Religious Belief in the Sixteenth Century," *Historical Research* 50 (1977): 248.

<sup>66</sup> Zell, "The Use of Religious Preambles," 248.

<sup>67</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 511–512.

<sup>68</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 35.

<sup>69</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 35.

There are further examples of the limited influence of the clergy's beliefs on the religious sentiments in parishioners' wills. One pair of examples is found in the above study of the wills of John Wakefield and Marjorie Coners, both witnessed by the curate William Chamber.<sup>70</sup> One expressed clearly reformist views with no reference to Mary, whilst the other used a more standard formula and bequeathed her soul to the Blessed Virgin. Whether Chamber's beliefs were reformist or Catholic, one or other of these preambles expressed an opposing view,<sup>71</sup> yet he was willing to be a witness to both. Another instance is seen in two wills from Chorley, both witnessed by the parish clerk, William Price. That of Roger Broome, 6 August 1606, was clearly, if conventionally, Protestant; "First, I bequeath my soule into the hands of almighty god my maker and onelie Redeemer trusting onelie to be saved by the meritts and bloodsheeding of Jesus Christ my onlie saviour."<sup>72</sup> But that of Humphrey Wilson, 24 July 1602, was just the basic bequest to 'Almighty God.'<sup>73</sup> If there was any pressure from Price to express overt Protestantism, Wilson felt at liberty to resist it. It should not be assumed that the parishioners were mindless sheep who just parroted whatever their minister taught them.

### Where the preamble primarily expresses the scribe's views, to what degree do these wills still give insights into the general religious beliefs of the community?

In some of the occasions where standard formulae are used, it is likely that the views expressed are primarily those of the scribe. However, even these need not be assumed useless as evidence of 'Reformation from below.' Continuing her study in the village of Orwell, Spufford notes five other men, who each scribed two or three wills in Orwell in the seventeenth century, using formulae distinct from each other, but with little variation themselves. However, even if Spufford is correct that therefore "the religious conviction of the scribe, not the testator, is apparent,"<sup>74</sup> given the variety of scribes in this small settlement, these wills at least shed light on the spiritual beliefs of several men and thus still provide some indication of the general religious convictions of the area.

<sup>70</sup> Clay, *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, 179–180, 256–257.

<sup>71</sup> It is extremely unlikely that Chamber's own views went from being reformist in 1543 to Catholic in 1547!

<sup>72</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 51–55.

<sup>73</sup> Pixton, *Wrenbury Wills and Inventories, 1542–1661*, 41–43.

<sup>74</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 35.

Another example of this variety in use of scribes is found in the wills of a couple from Leathley, Christopher and Sybil Lindley,<sup>75</sup> who wrote their wills just a fortnight apart in 1540. Despite writing their wills so close together, the significant differences in spelling clearly show these to be scribed by different people. Christopher's wrote "bequeathe my saule," Sybil's, "bequeath my saull." Christopher's wrote the names of three people clearly dear to the couple as "Umfride Hodgesson," his "sonne Laurence," and "Percvall Jenkinson," whereas Sybil's spelled them, "Umfray Hodgesson," "Lawrencie Lyndley my sone," and "Percyvall Jenkinson." Thus whether the different emphases in their preambles is from the testators or their scribes, we are seeing the views of two different people.

Spufford observes an incidence of the process of selecting a scribe for "Leonard Woolward of Balsham" in 1578.<sup>76</sup> The account shows "that the circle of people who could be asked to draw up a will was wide,"<sup>77</sup> and he chose a tradesman rather than a clergyman. Thus, at that time, a village had "several members ... who could write a document at need."<sup>78</sup> Therefore, even if some preambles reflect the views of the scribes, in many areas that is still providing a wide variety of local opinion. Furthermore, given the choice available, the testator would be able to choose someone likely to express views with which they agreed, so the opinion of the testator in a general sense may still be heard.

In the larger settlement of Willingham, Spufford observes an example of one person scribing many wills. Lance Milford, the schoolmaster, scribed fifty wills between 1570 and 1602, "experimenting with various formulae ... before settling [on] ... 'I bequeath my soul into the hands of God the father, and to Jesus Christ my saviour, by whose merits I hope to enjoy his everlasting rest'."<sup>79</sup> Even if these preambles primarily express Milford's beliefs, it is interesting to note that he was not the curate. William Norton, who was, only scribed four wills. Protestant feeling was clearly strong in this influential local layman, not just in a clergyman, who, it could be argued, might have been imposed on an unwilling parish. And Milford's successor as the main local scribe was another layman, John Hammond, who only made Milford's Protestant emphasis clearer

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<sup>75</sup> Clay, *A Selection of Wills from the Registry at York*, 123–124, 124–125.

<sup>76</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 30.

<sup>77</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 30.

<sup>78</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 31.

<sup>79</sup> Spufford, "The Scribes of Villagers' Wills," 36.

by adding “by whose only merits and mercies.”<sup>80</sup> Spufford observes from Hammond’s own will that “a genuine faith lay behind his standard protestant formula,”<sup>81</sup> so it is providing insight into his personal beliefs.

In addition to these preambles clearly expressing the beliefs of Milford and Hammond, I have already demonstrated the options people had when selecting a scribe. Therefore, even if in some of these cases the testators did not specifically ask for that formula to be used in their preambles, they had chosen someone who would have been known locally as holding strong Protestant views when they could have chosen someone else had they wished. So, whilst the preambles in such cases may not provide direct and specific insights into the testators’ beliefs, they can be seen to provide a general indication of their religious sentiments.

Is there independent evidence to back up this conclusion? There is in the case of Willingham, for Spufford notes from other sources that the laity of Willingham were “particularly zealous protestants.”<sup>82</sup> There was certainly “a flourishing Congregational conventicle” there in the mid-seventeenth century, and some Quakers,<sup>83</sup> and probably “secret conventicle meetings in Mary’s time.”<sup>84</sup> Had this evidence not existed, it could have been argued that the wills of the people of Willingham were only showing the beliefs of Milford and Hammond. But our conclusion, that, even when a majority of the wills in an area are scribed by a small number of people who consistently use a set formula, the preambles still reveal something of the religious views of the common people, has been shown to be sound in the case of Willingham. Therefore, the conclusions of wills studies that seek to show a shift towards Protestant views in an area from preambles can be afforded an *a priori* plausibility, even if most of the wills were scribed by a small number of people using set formulae.

Given that she has shown the Willingham laity to hold strong Protestant beliefs, it is odd that Spufford then writes that Milford “unfortunately seems to have made such an impact ... that [the villagers’] individual convictions ... are masked, in their wills, by his phraseology.”<sup>85</sup> The details of their personal spirituality may indeed have been masked, since the preambles lack the personal wording that could have revealed this. But Spufford’s own research has shown that the general tenor of their

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<sup>80</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 36.

<sup>81</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 37.

<sup>82</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 37.

<sup>83</sup> Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, 302.

<sup>84</sup> Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, 329.

<sup>85</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 37.



Protestant convictions has not been masked, but rather reflected (if at second hand) in the wills scribed by Milford and Hammond.

Spufford observes that the formulae of Milford and Hammond were widely used by various different scribes who also wrote wills in the early-seventeenth century.<sup>86</sup> Yet some scribes would sometimes use neutral wording and sometimes one of these Protestant formulae, so it is clear that the wording was not simply parroted in every case without thought. Rather, they were used as a concise way of expressing the Protestant feeling that was common amongst the villagers. She is of course right to point out that, given the general feeling of the area and the standard use of these formulae, “it is impossible to tell how far individual feeling is involved”<sup>87</sup> in any particular case. But that only highlights the fact that these will preambles are giving an accurate picture of the religious sentiments of the majority of the common people in this locality. Studies of will preambles from the sixteenth century can, therefore, be seen to provide a good indication of the overall beliefs of the testators.

### The significance of these findings

Given the findings demonstrated above regarding the confidence that can be had in will preambles to reflect the beliefs of an area, what can be made of studies that have been done? It can be concluded that Dickens’ survey of Yorkshire wills that finds “for the years 1547 to 1553 there occurred 139 traditional wills, as opposed to 153 of the Protestant type, with 31 neutral,”<sup>88</sup> is providing a genuine insight into the beliefs of the people. Even if it is the case that some of the ‘neutral’ wills are those of testators who still hold Catholic beliefs but are nervous about expressing them under a Protestant regime, the numbers of those holding Protestant and Catholic convictions are roughly equal. But the fact that a large number of testators still felt comfortable using the traditional formula suggests that there were no great pressures on people to follow the official line in their preambles. And the fact that the neutral formula was a perfectly viable option for anyone who did feel pressure means that one can be confident that the use of a Protestant formula does indicate that the testator held reformist beliefs to some degree. Even in a generally conservative area, tending to accept change more slowly than the South, roughly half of the

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<sup>86</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 37–38.

<sup>87</sup> Spufford, “The Scribes of Villagers’ Wills,” 38.

<sup>88</sup> A. G. Dickens, “The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England 1520–1558,” in *Reformation to Revolution*, ed. M. Todd (London: Routledge, 1995), 172.

people in this survey had accepted, or were moving towards, Protestant beliefs, even at this early stage of the Reformation. This survey by Dickens can, therefore, be used as strong evidence for 'Reformation from below.'

However, what of the noted fact that surveys of wills usually show some shift back towards traditional wording during the reign of Mary?<sup>89</sup> It is not my contention that external forces had no influence whatsoever on what anyone wrote in their wills. But the pressure to revert to Catholic, or at least neutral, terminology when Mary was on the throne was far stronger than any pressure to abandon Catholic terminology when Henry or Edward ruled. The famous case of William Tracy, who was posthumously convicted of heresy and his body exhumed and burned because of the Protestant preamble in his 1531 will,<sup>90</sup> might well have made people cautious about expressing Protestant beliefs in their own wills during Henry's reign. And so when Protestants were being burned at the stake under Mary, it is understandable that some who held Protestant convictions might be reticent about expressing them in a legal document.

Duffy, however, cannot provide evidence of any similar level of pressure against expressions of Catholic belief during the reigns of Henry and Edward. In the one example he gives, from 1543, the preamble was not the issue at stake, but provisions for prayer using the rosary for the testator's soul.<sup>91</sup> Whilst Duffy speculates that knowledge of this might have caused people also to be cautious of expressing Catholic beliefs, at most this could merely explain some of the increase in neutral preambles, not actively Protestant ones. Nothing so dramatic was done to this testator's body as was done with William Tracy's, and there were no Catholic martyrdoms under Henry or Edward, whilst there were hundreds of Protestant ones under Mary. If this sort of pressure caused there to be some people with Catholic beliefs who did not express these in their wills during the reigns of Henry and Edward, it would have caused there to be far more people with Protestant beliefs who did not express them in their wills under Mary's reign. Therefore, the conclusions are sound of will surveys that find evidence for 'Reformation from below' from shifts towards Protestant wording in the preambles. Whilst they might underestimate the percentage of testators who held Catholic beliefs from the late 1530s until 1553, this would be more than balanced out by a greater tendency to underestimate the percentage of testators who held Protestant beliefs from 1553 to 1559.

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<sup>89</sup> Dickens, "The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England 1520–1558," 172.

<sup>90</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 511.

<sup>91</sup> Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 512.

Dickens has conducted an overview of a number of will surveys and observes that although there is some decline in the use of Protestant preambles during Mary's reign, "nowhere does this partial reversion restore the Henrician situation."<sup>92</sup> Therefore, even under Mary, far more common folk were expressing Reformed beliefs in their wills than were doing so than during the latter years of Henry's reign when, if there was any pressure, it was against the expression of Catholic beliefs. This shows that, in just two decades from the late 1530s to the late 1550s, there had been a significant growth in England in the number of ordinary people holding Protestant beliefs with firm conviction. Given the findings demonstrated in this paper, one can have great confidence that these studies provide clear and firm evidence for 'Reformation from below.'

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<sup>92</sup> Dickens, "The Early Expansion of Protestantism in England 1520–1558," 172.