George Gifford
and the Reformation of the Common Sort
Habent sua fata libelli

Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies Series

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The biographical sketch of George Gifford in the first chapter, especially as it relates to Maldon, has been guided at nearly every turn by the work of William J. Petchey, local historian and librarian of the Thomas Plume Library in Maldon until his death in spring 2001. Close to five decades of archival research meant that Dr. Petchey knew the Maldon borough records better than anyone. His dissertation and subsequent book on the history of Maldon provided the road map for my archival research in Essex. I regret that I did not have opportunity to share with him my appreciation for the gracious encouragement he offered in response to my initial request for advice, and for his eagerness to discuss my work on Gifford.

The transition from dissertation to book is rumored to be a rocky one, but again my way was made easier with the help of old friends and new colleagues. Samford University has been a marvelous place to begin a career in teaching, and my fellow members of the religion department—David Bains, Paul Holloway, Penny Marler, Ken Roxburgh, and Joe Scrivner—have been welcoming and encouraging. My students have made teaching enjoyable and even energizing for my research. I benefited from many conversations with friends around the university, and special thanks go to Gerald Bray, Timothy George, Killian Manning, and Joe Scrivner for reading and commenting on portions of this work. Cathy Thompson and Beth Gilbert both provided excellent secretarial support. Thanks also go to my student assistants, Matt Grimes and David Conrad, who were undaunted by vaguely worded research requests and many trips back and
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I presented portions of chapters at various conferences and received many helpful responses. An early version of chapter 5 first appeared as “‘Subtiltie’ Exposed: Pastoral Perspectives on Witch Belief in the Thought of George Gifford” in the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, and I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint the material here.

Early in George Gifford’s dialogue *Countrie Divinitie*, the easygoing Atheos predicted what life would be like if the puritans had their way: “You would have [men] sitte mooping alwayes at their bookes,” he moaned; “I like not that.” I doubt anyone comes to the end of a writing project without sharing Atheos’s sentiments at some points along the way. I certainly could not have found the will to “sitte mooping alwayes” at my books without the steadfast support of my family. My son William showed up just in time for the last few weeks of graduate school and has been a very present companion during the revision process, quick to remind me when his books were to be preferred to mine. My parents were unswerving in their optimism and offered the kind of unbridled confidence that only parents can seem to manage. My in-laws were likewise supportive, and special thanks go to my father-in-law, Edd Rowell, for copyediting services on early drafts. But surely I would have given up “mooping” at books long ago had it not been for my wife, Beth. Her support came in a variety of roles—everything from therapist to editor to indexer—even as she juggled her own studies in musicology and the challenges of pregnancy and new motherhood. Yet to say more risks reducing who she is to what she does, a disservice indeed, and so I leave it to her to recognize that my love and gratitude extend much further than written words on a page. I leave it to Beth, who knows.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Puritans and the Common Sort

The road running northeast out of London towards the town of Chelmsford carries the traveler into the heart of Essex, the county that topographer John Norden described in 1594 as “most fatt, frutefull, and full of profitable thinges.” Norden no doubt had in mind the agricultural bounty of Essex—an “Englishe Goshen,” he observed—when he spoke of its fertility. But Essex also had a long history of producing sizeable crops of a different sort: religious radicals and reformers who seemed to maintain a toehold despite repeated attempts by authorities at enforcing conformity and order. Discontent seemed to simmer constantly under the surface and frequently bubbled over in many Essex towns. From the Lollards of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, to Lutherans in the 1520s, to the defiant Protestants during the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary in the 1550s, religious malcontents persisted in Essex, always out of step with the status quo. By the time Norden made his observations toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, decades of political and religious upheaval had ended with the Church of England rooted firmly in the Protestant camp. Or so its defenders claimed. Critics, on the other hand, continued to argue that the English church was “but halfly reformed,” a work in progress in dire need of attention. Remnants of Catholicism persisted in the Elizabethan church—“popishe abuses,” detractors claimed—ranging from clerical vestments to unscriptural liturgies in the Book of Common Prayer. Moreover, not only was the church polluted; critics charged it lacked the well-trained, preaching clergy and the discipline needed to address the problems. The more vocal and insistent of these critics knew each other as “the godly,” “professors,” or “gospellers.” Their enemies derided them as “puritans,” “precisionists,” and “busie controllers.” Regardless of the label, Essex seemed to observers then and now to have had more than its fair share of these discontented and restless Protestants.1

1John Norden, Speculi Britanniae Pars: An Historical and Chorographical Description of the County of Essex,
Figure 1. John Norden's Map of Essex, 1594. Reproduced by permission of the Essex Record Office.
The road from London to Chelmsford was as good a setting as any, then, for one such impatient reformer to set a fictional debate over what he knew to be the woeful condition of the Church of England. George Gifford was just beginning his career as minister in Maldon, a coastal town a few miles east of Chelmsford, when he published a lively, sometimes amusing dialogue entitled *A briefe discourse of certaine points of the religion which is among the common sort of Christians, which may bee termed the countrie divinitie, with a manifest confutation of the same.* Like many of Gifford’s writings, *Countrie Divinitie* has a didactic tone and a polemical purpose, initially seen in Gifford’s choice of names for his characters: Zelotes, a zealous, godly puritan well schooled in scripture and theology; and Atheos, an unlearned country person—one of the “common sort”—though hardly an atheist by the modern definition.

Gifford’s two travelers encountered one another on the road to Chelmsford, and before long the conversation turned to religion. Atheos was quite proud of his minister in his small town: “I am perswaded wee have the beste Prieste in this countreye, wee would bee lothe to forgoe him for the learnedest of them all.” When pressed for details, Atheos was quick to name the virtues of his popular priest: “Hee is as gentle a person as ever I see: a verye good fellow, hee will not sticke when good fellowes and honest men meet together to spende his groate at the Alehouse.” Furthermore, he frequently joined fellow townspeople at bowling or card games, and was known to arbitrate disagreements between his parishioners over a drink or two—“a Godlye waye to make Charitie,” Atheos concluded.

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3. London, 1581 (hereafter referred to as *Countrie Divinitie*). Quotations that follow are from the 1582 edition. For a complete listing of all printed editions of Gifford’s works and short titles used herein, see appendix 1.

4. In the sixteenth century, absolute disavowal of a deity was quite rare, if not unheard of; Gifford’s concern was with those who, in his estimation, paid insufficient attention to matters of religion. Zelotes’s definition of atheism is telling: “I know there be many which care not for the Pope, but yet beeleeve much of his doctrine: they bee those which wee call Athiests, of no religion, but looke whatsoever any prince doeth set forth, that they will professe.” Gifford, *Countrie Divinitie*, C6r. On such questions of definition see the excellent discussion in John Craig, *Reformation, Politics and Polemics: The Growth of Protestantism in East Anglian Market Towns, 1500–1610* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 12–24.
To Zelotes, however, this jolly priest sounded “more meete for to keepe swine then too bee a Sheaphearde over the flocke of Christe.” Should not the minister be busy teaching and preaching? Atheos protested that his priest read the prayer book services “as well as anye of them,” but Zelotes grumbled that a ten-year-old boy could do as much. What Atheos and his merry companions needed, Zelotes proclaimed, was someone who would “reproove naughtinesse among the people” and spend time in his study preparing sermons rather than in the alehouse making merry. By this point in the conversation, Atheos appeared to regret his choice of traveling companions, for he recognized Zelotes as “one of those curious and precise fellowes which will allowe no recreation,” one who meddled in everyone’s affairs and wore his piety on his sleeve. In short, a “busie controuler.”

Even at this early stage in his career, Gifford was no stranger to conflict and had likely been on the receiving end of Atheos’s accusation, just like his godly protagonist Zelotes. In fact, although Countrie Divinitie presents itself as fictional, the circumstances of Gifford’s life in the latter 1570s suggest Gifford may have had a model in mind when he described Atheos’s less-than-godly minister, known elsewhere in the dialogue as “Sir Robert.” Early in the dialogue, Atheos claimed to live “not farre from Chelmsforde” in a place he called “G.B.” At least two possibilities exist for “G.B.” One is Great Baddow, which lies a few miles east of Chelmsford. At the time Gifford wrote Countrie Divinitie, the minister in Great Baddow was Christopher Ampleforth. A survey of Essex clergy conducted by puritans in the 1580s identified Ampleforth as one of several “preachers of a scandalous life in Essex,” claiming that he “hadde a childe by his owne sister… and is also suspected of poperie… and he is one that doth falsifie the Scriptures.” A second possibility is Great Burstead, which is farther away from Chelmsford but quite close to Mountnessing, the town where Gifford lived at the time of his ordination in 1578. The minister in Great Burstead during the period was Timothy Okeley, identified in the same puritan survey as “a gamster.” Gifford may well have hidden behind initials and a changed name to take a concealed jab at Ampleforth or Okeley. The reference would have been recognizable to those in the know—probably a small group—while retaining a
veneer of respectable deniability. More important, Atheos’s minister was emblematic of the problems facing the English church. For Gifford and the godly, the vague reference to “G.B.” pointed to a larger truth: far too many parishes in England languished under a “Sir Robert.”

With their battle lines drawn, Zelotes and Atheos proceeded to cover a laundry list of troublesome topics in Elizabethan ecclesiastical life: the education of ministers, the frequency and content of preaching, moral regulation in communities, scripture reading by the laity, popular entertainments, faith and works, predestination and election, church polity, loyalty to the magistrate, and more. In the course of the dialogue, the reader hears from Atheos that those who filled the parishes of England, the common sort of Christians, were by and large satisfied with the status quo in their communities, especially when it came to matters of religion. They were suspicious of change, since they saw no need for improving what did not look to be in disrepair. They valued their traditions, especially the festivals and entertainments that gave them a sense of connection with the world of their ancestors. Notably, they considered themselves good Protestants—Atheos at one point vehemently consigned the pope and his teaching to “the dunghill”—but at the same time they doubted the necessity of the more extreme pietistic practices and resented the meddlesome ministers who demanded them. Listening to Atheos, one comes away with the impression the common sort were content with their religion and communities until a cantankerous and troublesome minority of pushy Protestants came along to upset the natural order of things.

Zelotes, on the other hand, told an entirely different tale. He and Atheos may have traveled the same road, but based on their respective descriptions of the church, they inhabited different worlds. What Atheos saw as respect for tradition, Zelotes thought was a blind devotion to the sins of the fathers. He and the godly believed that the common sort failed to take their faith seriously, instead confining it to a manageable corner of life and avoiding the demands of the gospel. For example, Zelotes observed that most people allowed much more time for bawdy entertainments than for listening to preaching. Atheos could occupy the ale bench for hours but “if the Preacher doe passe his houre but a little, your buttoke beginne for to ake, and ye wishe in your hearte that the Pulpit would fall”—hardly the wholehearted desire for learning that godly pastors hoped to see.7

Yet despite the common sort’s lack of zeal and their stubborn attachment to tradition, Zelotes—and by extension Gifford—did not lay all the

7Gifford, Countrie Divinitie, D2r.
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