Introduction

The English Reformation was as much about oaths as it was about Henry's marriage, succession, and headship over the English Church. The London Charterhouse knew this well. On 4 May 1534, royal commissioners visited this famously austere Carthusian monastery to tender to them the oath of succession. According to a recently passed act of Parliament, all English subjects were required to swear fidelity to Henry, to Henry's new wife Anne Boleyn, and to their heirs. They also had to swear to observe and maintain the whole contents of the act, and these contents explicitly declared Henry's first marriage to Katherine of Aragon unlawful. When the commissioners arrived, the prior of the Charterhouse, John Houghton, attempted to turn them away. Houghton declared that it was not his business to meddle with the affairs of kings. The king could repudiate and marry whomever he wanted without the Charterhouse's consent. But the commissioners held firm, responding:

> We require you without disguise, evasion or sophistry to swear obedience to the King's law and laying your hands upon Christ's Holy Gospels – we shall stand by and administer the oath – to declare without qualification that the former marriage was unlawful and therefore rightly annulled; that the later marriage shall be held lawful and in accord with divine law and therefore rightly entitled to the approval of all.[1]

Houghton refused the commissioners' demand. He could not see how a marriage 'celebrated according to the rite of the church and observed for so long' could be declared void.[2] The commissioners then imprisoned Houghton and the procurator of the house, Humphrey Middlemore, in the Tower of London. After about three weeks of captivity, Houghton

[1] Chauncy, *Passion and Martyrdom* (1570), 61. This is printed from a manuscript edition of 1570. All English quotations from the 1570 version are the translation of A. F. Radcliffe. I will also make use of the first printed edition of the work: Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550). All English quotations cited from this version are my own translation.
[2] Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550), sig. M3^{v}.

and Middlemore were persuaded that the oath of succession was not a matter of faith, nor worth dying for, and they agreed to submit. Yet the rest of the Charterhouse was not convinced. At the next visit of the royal commissioners, the monks all stoutly refused to swear. During a third visit, Houghton and half a dozen other brothers took the oath. Finally, after a speech by Houghton and under threat of imprisonment, the rest of the house swore the oath, 'but only under the condition "as far as it was lawful"'.[3] We do not know the exact form of their oath nor how they attached this condition. All that survive today are notarial attestations verifying that the monks took their 'oaths and fidelities'.[4]

Swearing the oath of succession did not end the troubles of the London Charterhouse. In the summer of 1534, the London Carthusians seem to have been tendered an acknowledgement of royal supremacy. At that time, Henry was administering an oath to all clerical institutions. In this oath each member of an institution had to acknowledge that Henry was the supreme head of the church in England and that the Pope had no more power in England than any other foreign bishop. The actual profession of the Charterhouse does not survive, and our main source for the events at the London Charterhouse, Maurice Chauncy (a monk of the Charterhouse in the 1530s who in the reign of Edward VI wrote an account of the trials of the London Charterhouse), was strangely silent on the events of the summer of 1534. However, a list of various clerical institutions that professed the royal supremacy at that time survives. Under the heading of London, it reads: 'nine Carthusians contumaciously refused to undertake the oath'.[5] There is no record of Henry taking any punitive action against the nine Charterhouse monks who refused the oath.

The plot thickened in November 1534 when Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy. Despite the fact that no oath was prescribed by the act, Houghton, along with Robert Laurence and Augustine Webster (the priors of the Charterhouses of Beauvale and Axholme respectively), 'anticipated' the coming of another royal commission and sought an interview with Secretary Thomas Cromwell to forestall the visit in the spring of 1535.[6] Cromwell first declined to meet with them, but eventually he demanded that they reject the authority of the Pope and abnegate 'all other external

[3] Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550), sig. M4^{r}. Only the 1550 version of Chauncy's narrative notes that the Charterhouse swore the oath of succession *conditionally*.
[4] The original notarial attestations are NA E25/82/3 (*LP*, VII 728). They are printed correctly in Rymer (ed.), *Foedera*, XIV:491–2. The first one is from 29 May, and the second from 6 June 1534.
[5] BL Cotton MS E VI, fol. 209^{v} (*LP*, VII 891 (ii)).
[6] Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550), sigs. N4^{v}–O1^{r}.

powers, jurisdictions, obediences to whatever person or order they had owed or promised' and affirm that Henry alone was the supreme head of the church.[7] The priors replied evasively that 'they would do all that true Christians, dutiful and loyal subjects, ought to do for their prince; in all things they would willingly obey the King as far as divine law permitted'.[8] But Cromwell would not accept such an equivocal answer. He allegedly retorted:

> No reservation whatever shall be accepted by me. My will and command is that without delay before this honorable assembly you shall make the simple declaration without addition or disguise, confirming and approving all that is submitted to you. Moreover – for fear lest heart and voice be not in accord – I require you to testify by a solemn oath that you believe and firmly hold to be true the very words – my decision is irrevocable – which we propound to you for an honest confession of faith.[9]

The priors were unwilling to make this oath. After a show trial at the end of April, Houghton, Laurence, and Webster were executed on 4 May 1535. Immediately before his execution, Houghton countered the oath of supremacy with his own oath, calling 'to witness heaven and earth and God the Lord of heaven and earth' that he refused to consent to the king and his law 'not from malice or obstinacy or wish to rebel, but from fear of God', lest he offend God's 'glorious majesty' by believing something contrary to 'the pillar of truth, the Catholic Church'.[10]

After the execution of the Charterhouse's leader, Henry continued to try to bully the Carthusians into submission. On 4 June Henry executed three other leaders of the London Charterhouse (Humphrey Middlemore, William Exmew, and Sebastian Newdigate) for refusing to acknowledge his supremacy. For the next two years, the brethren of the London Charterhouse endured extreme pressure. Henry reduced their rations, subjected them to systematic sermons in favour of his supremacy, and sent some of the brothers to monasteries supportive of Henry's supremacy.[11] According to John Whalley, a commissioner Cromwell sent to try to convince the Charterhouse to submit and leave their order, the Charterhouse's resistance to Henry's will centred around a previous oath they had made to the Pope: 'they feare that in case they shulde nowe swarue and goo from theire Religion, and hereafter the pope and his adherentes shulde prevayle, that then they shulde be grevyously punnyshed (yea vnto the deathe) for

[7] Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550), sig. 01[r].
[8] Chauncy, *Passion and Martyrdom* (1570), 79.
[9] Chauncy, *Passion and Martyrdom* (1570), 79.
[10] Chauncy, *Passion and Martyrdom* (1570), 91–3.
[11] For a detailed account of these two years, see Thompson, *Carthusian Order*, 411–35.

breakyng of the othe that they have made to the pope'.[12] Finally, under the threat of dissolution, twenty-one brethren of the London Charterhouse gave in and took a new form of the oath of supremacy on 18 May 1537.[13] Yet while they swore outwardly, according to Chauncy 'in their hearts' they prayed to the Lord:

> We beseech your mercy, so that you may not regard this way which we act externally in placing our hands on the book of the holy Gospels and kissing it, and neither accept it as if we are confirming or consenting to the will of the king, but rather in veneration of the sacred words described in the Gospel you may receive this our external pretence as made for the preservation of our house.[14]

Their oath did not end the matter. On 15 November 1538, the London Charterhouse was suppressed. As for the ten monks who refused to swear in May 1537, they were imprisoned at Newgate and systematically starved to death.

The story of the London Charterhouse in the 1530s illustrates the central argument of this book: oaths were crucial to the implementation of and response to the Henrician Reformation. Oaths were the means through which the Henrician regime sought to enforce the parliamentary revolution of 1534 on the Charterhouse. Oaths were also fundamental to the Charterhouse's resistance and acquiescence to this same revolution. And while the exact details of the above narration may be exceptional in that our knowledge of the Charterhouse is greater than our knowledge of other institutions, the role of oaths in the story is representative of the Henrician Reformation in general. Oaths were a primary language of the Henrician Reformation, an important medium through which the Henrician regime negotiated key aspects of its religious policy with the English populace.

The focus of this book is the role of oaths in the Henrician Reformation. Its novelty lies in its placement of the oath – as opposed to a person, movement, or set of ideas – as the protagonist in the story of the Henrician Reformation. Previous historiography has of course mentioned oaths, but the emphasis has almost solely been on the content of oaths. Oaths are depicted as important insofar as they provide insight into what the Henrician Reformation was about: divorce, succession, papal authority, royal

[12] NA SP1/96, fol. 61r (*LP*, VIII 600), printed in Thompson, *Carthusian Order*, 415–17. The oath to which Whalley referred was probably the Carthusians' initial monastic profession, specifically their vow of obedience.

[13] The form of this oath with the monks' original subscriptions and a notarial attestation survives. It is NA E25/82/2 (*LP*, XII (i) 1232). It is printed in Rymer (ed.), *Foedera*, XIV:588–9.

[14] Chauncy, *Historia aliqvot* (1550), sig. Q2v.

supremacy, and obedience to the king. Clearly the content of oaths was important, but this book claims that the actual device was of equal significance. Post-structuralist philosophers have taught us that language is not simply a transparent reflection of reality; it constitutes reality. If oaths were a language of the Reformation, then oaths are important not only because they communicated the Reformation but also because they constituted the Reformation. The English Reformation was just as much about its method of implementation and response as it was about the theology or political theory it transmitted. This is the central insight of this book.

The first part of my argument is that oaths were the principal means through which the Henrician regime implemented its Reformation on the ground and in the parish. After all, a close reading of the story of the Charterhouse indicates that the London Carthusians were tendered at least four different professions: an oath of succession in the spring of 1534, an institutional profession of Henry's supremacy in the summer of 1534, another oath of supremacy in the spring of 1535, and yet another form of the oath of supremacy in 1537. And as Chapter 2 demonstrates, the oaths administered to the Charterhouse were simply a selection of a much larger pool of professions that Henry employed to enforce the Boleyn (and then Seymour) marriage and succession, the abrogation of papal authority, and the establishment of royal supremacy over the English Church. Furthermore, Chapter 6 shows how oaths to tell the truth and abjuration oaths were a significant part of the Henrician regime's campaign against heresy.

My claim that oaths were essential to the implementation of the Reformation needs to be set in the context of other historians' accounts of the Henrician Reformation. Current debates about the Reformation usually fall into two schools. The first is the revisionist school, whose members include J. J. Scarisbrick, Eamon Duffy, Christopher Haigh, and G. W. Bernard. Scarisbrick explored the implementation of and response to the dissolution, spoilage, and appropriation of monasteries, chantries, schools, hospitals, guilds, and churches.[15] His focus, then, was primarily institutional. By contrast, Eamon Duffy's description of the Henrician Reformation centred on traditional parish religion: the veneration of images, the cult of the saints, the enjoyment of Holy Days, the practice of pilgrimages, and the industry of purgatory. Duffy investigated how the Henrician regime reformed these practices and how this Reformation was contested

[15] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 65–135.

on the ground.[16] Christopher Haigh's narrative of the Henrician Reformation focused less on the implementation of reform and more on the political circumstances that led to reform. Parliamentary contests, court intrigue, and international diplomacy all featured prominently in Haigh's story.[17] G. W. Bernard covered all three of these themes – institutions, traditional parish religion, and politics – in his magisterial explanation of Henry's Reformation.[18] What unified all of these revisionist accounts of the Henrician Reformation was an emphasis on the strength of the Henrician regime and its ability to enforce its Reformation through intimidation and violence. Scarisbrick claimed that the Henrician regime 'was astonishingly efficient and formidable'.[19] It accomplished its Reformation through a combination of manipulation, trickery, and bullying – particularly imprisonment and death.[20] Duffy argued that the 'Treasons Act was a formidable instrument, and complaint against the King's proceedings liable to backfire on the complainer'.[21] Haigh then narrated how the Henrician regime carried out the Treasons Act, executing its foremost opponents.[22] Haigh claimed that 'a combination of government coercion and individual conversion drove traditional Catholicism from the churches', but he amended his argument by noting that most people 'experienced the reformation as obedience rather than conversion', thereby prioritizing government coercion.[23] Finally, Bernard's account of the Henrician Reformation depicted Henry as a bloodthirsty tyrant who used intimidation, imprisonment, and execution to overawe his subjects into submission. In Bernard's own words, 'the power of a determined, devious and ruthless king and his councilors was too great'. People 'had little option but to acquiesce and comply'.[24]

In opposition to the revisionist school, historians such as Ethan Shagan, Alec Ryrie, and Kevin Sharpe (often labelled as post-revisionists) have underscored the weakness of the Henrician regime and its inability to enforce its Reformation without the cooperation of the provincial gentry and even the populace at large. After all, noted Shagan and Sharpe, Tudor government had no police force, no standing army, and no provincial bureaucracy.[25] If the Henrician regime wanted to implement its

[16] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 379–447.
[17] Haigh, *English Reformations*, 88–136, 152–67. Haigh highlighted his emphasis on politics on page 21: 'Religious change was governed by law, and law was the outcome of politics. The Reformations were begun, defined, sustained, slowed, and revitalized by political events.'
[18] Bernard, *King's Reformation*.
[19] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 81.
[20] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 61–8, 77–9, 109.
[21] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 385. [22] Haigh, *English Reformations*, 119–21, 139, 141.
[23] Haigh, *English Reformations*, 3, 21. [24] Bernard, *King's Reformation*, 601.
[25] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 2; Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 81.

Reformation effectively, then it had to win the consent of the people, claimed post-revisionists. Ethan Shagan thus explored the reasons why the English people chose to 'collaborate' with the Henrician regime, arguing that the Henrician regime was able to implement its Reformation only because local authorities and other 'collaborators' negotiated with the regime.[26] Shagan further argued that people negotiated because they had something to gain by accepting reform, be it political patronage, royal support in a local dispute, financial gain, or social emancipation. Other historians have stressed that people cooperated with the regime in implementing reforms because of ingrained habits of loyalty to their lawful sovereign.[27] While not invalidating the 'hard', coercive power of the regime, this 'soft, ideological' power was, in the words of Alec Ryrie, the 'decisive' reason behind Henry's ability to secure his subjects' assent to his divorce.[28] Sharpe, however, asserted that another form of ideological power was pre-eminent in 'securing compliance', the power of representation.[29] Sharpe has analysed in great detail the propaganda (texts, images, and performances) of the Henrician regime, stating that 'power and authority, the legitimation of monarchy and dynasty, depended on representations'.[30] Although there is therefore great diversity among post-revisionist explanations, what sets them apart from revisionists is their claim that the operative means by which the Henrician regime implemented its Reformation was persuasion not intimidation, negotiation rather than physical coercion.

This book modifies both the revisionists' and post-revisionists' explanations of the Reformation by arguing that oaths were a central way (if not the central way) in which Henry both coerced his subjects into obedience and secured their consent to many of his policies. Note that I am not arguing that oaths were the *only* way in which the regime implemented its Reformation. Proclamations, injunctions, visitations, executions, representations of the monarch, and the various 'carrots' the regime offered to those who collaborated with it remain important.[31] Yet what undergirded all of these methods of implementation was the belief that Henry had the right to change his succession, reform the church, and punish

[26] Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 22.
[27] Marsh, *Popular Religion*, 201–4, Marshall, *Reformation England*, 55–6. Revisionists like Scarisbrick and post-revisionists like Shagan also recognize the validity of this point. See Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 81, 109; Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, 88.
[28] Ryrie, *Age of Reformation*, 123. [29] Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 84.
[30] Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, 15.
[31] For example, Henry did not use oaths to force his subjects to destroy images or to win their assent to a new English Bible.

those who opposed his will. Obedience was 'the essence of Henrician religion',[32] the thread on which all other Henrician reforms hanged, and oaths were paramount in coercing and convincing Henry's subjects to be obedient.

My claim that oaths were essential to the implementation of the Reformation is novel in that oaths do not play a major role in the standard accounts of either the revisionists or post-revisionists. Oaths are absent from Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars*, Shagan's *Popular Politics and the English Reformation*, and the sections on the Henrician Reformation in Ryrie's *Age of Reformation* and Sharpe's *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*. Haigh has only a paragraph on the oath of succession, a few sentences on the punishment of those who refused Henry's oaths, and a few more sentences on the role of oaths in the Pilgrimage of Grace.[33] Scarisbrick overlooked oaths in his section on the Henrician Reformation, and then when talking about the Elizabethan oath of supremacy, he questioned 'how much oaths mattered anyway'.[34] Oaths do play a notable role in Bernard's story, but even he minimized their significance. Refusing to swear the oath of succession was not, for Bernard, an 'overtly political activity'.[35] Bernard treated oaths not so much as a means of coercion but rather as 'tests of loyalty' which were 'intended rather to flush out secret and internal opposition'.[36] In the end, oaths were less important to Bernard than the penalties Henry imposed on those who refused his oaths, notably imprisonment and execution.

The primary reason why historians overlook oaths is because they misunderstand the nature and importance of oaths in the sixteenth century. We view oaths through our modern bias. Today, oaths are insignificant. They matter only insofar as they increase the likelihood of truthful testimony in courts of law by imposing the formal penalty of perjury on those who lie after swearing an oath. Oaths provide a legal incentive to tell the truth, an incentive that is absent in unsworn testimony or everyday conversation, whether confirmed with an oath (the common expletive 'God' is a derivative of oath-taking) or not. Outside of court, oaths today have no power. This modern bias is present in two generally excellent histories that do emphasize the role of oaths in the Henrician Reformation: David Martin Jones' *Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England* and Geoffrey Elton's *Policy and Police*. Jones focused on the legal power of Henrician state oaths, noting that 'an oath widely and unreservedly accepted was superfluous, as it merely confirmed a pre-existing natural

[32] Rex, 'Crisis of Obedience', 894. [33] Haigh, *English Reformations*, 119, 121, 141, 146, 149.
[34] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 137–8. [35] Bernard, *King's Reformation*, 125.
[36] Bernard, *King's Reformation*, 160; Bernard, 'Tyranny of Henry VIII', 119.

obligation'.[37] Elton, whose depiction of the Henrician state oaths remains the most nuanced to date, nevertheless concluded by claiming that 'by themselves oaths could not achieve very much'. They were useful only to the extent that they 'made people solemnly aware of their new duty'.[38]

The problem with such a modern understanding of oaths is that it fails to recognize the great spiritual power of oaths in the sixteenth century. Oaths did not merely 'confirm a pre-existing natural obligation'; they also cemented this natural obligation by adding to it a spiritual bond. Oaths did more than simply make people 'aware of their new duty'; they made God the enforcer of their new duty. Indeed, the argument of Chapter 1 is that oaths were seen as powerful because the act of swearing gave the juror access to Almighty God, and God would not allow his person to be abused by false or vain swearing. Accordingly, this book contends that the principal means of coercion of the Henrician Reformation was not physical (as the revisionists claimed) or ideological (as some post-revisionists emphasized) but theological. The English Reformation was not just about theology; it was achieved through theology.

And this explains why the Henrician regime implemented its Reformation through oaths. Jones stated that the Henrician regime turned to oaths because they were flexible, because they had a 'long constitutional and common-law pedigree', and because the regime had no 'viable alternatives'.[39] While these factors were certainly important, Chapter 1 argues that the primary rationale behind the Henrician regime's employment of oaths was its desire to make the most powerful being in the universe (God) enforce the obedience of its subjects. Similarly, Elton maintained that the Henrician regime used oaths selectively because it recognized that oaths were inefficient and ineffective – they 'could not achieve very much'.[40] By contrast, Chapter 3 argues that Henry employed oaths selectively precisely because he was aware of the power of oaths. Henry administered the most detailed, strongest oaths to groups of his subjects who had sworn previous oaths, oaths potentially subversive to royal authority. Henry took oaths seriously because his subjects did. After all, Whalley observed that the London Charterhouse would not submit to Henry because of their previous oath to the Pope. The only way to invalidate such a powerful bond was to meet it with an equally powerful bond, another oath. It is possible to view the Henrician Reformation as a spiritual arms race, where both Henry and his subjects sought to best each other by swearing stronger and stronger oaths.

[37] Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance*, 61.
[38] Elton, *Policy and Police*, 230.
[39] Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance*, 61.
[40] Elton, *Policy and Police*, 230. See also 381–2 for another dismissal of oaths as ineffective.

Of course, my claim that oaths were the primary means through which the Henrician regime implemented its Reformation does not completely invalidate revisionist or post-revisionist explanations. The Henrician regime's use of oaths does, for example, support the post-revisionist claim that the Henrician state was weak. It relied on God to police its Reformation because it was unable to police its subjects on its own. Oaths also demonstrate that the Henrician regime sought to win its subjects' consent. This consent was not, however, always voluntary. The penalty for refusing to swear, as Bernard has clearly reminded us, was imprisonment and (eventually) execution. The regime's use of spiritual coercion was thus still backed up with raw physical coercion. Finally, propaganda remained important, for in order for the oath to be completely valid, the juror had to be convinced that the content of his oath was true. But even if propaganda persuaded the juror that his oath was right and violence persuaded him to take the oath, it was the oath itself that was the chief guarantee of the juror's continual loyalty after the act of swearing. Oaths were therefore central to the implementation of the Henrician Reformation.

The second part of my argument is that oaths were crucial to the English people's response to the Henrician Reformation. For simplicity's sake, the key themes in the English people's response to the Henrician Reformation can be divided into three parts: what the majority of the English people generally did, why they did this, and how they did this. My analysis of oaths increases our knowledge of all three of these questions, though my argument chiefly relates to the third part. Nevertheless, the first question – what did the majority of the people generally do in response to the Henrician Reformation? – is the most basic. A. G. Dickens, writing in the Whig tradition, argued that the majority of the English people *embraced* the Reformation. They were discontented with medieval piety and the church, so they welcomed reform.[41] Revisionists have destroyed Dickens' depiction of medieval English Catholicism, convincingly arguing that most English people were pleased with their church and its style of piety at the beginning of the sixteenth century.[42] As such, revisionists have emphasized the English people's *resistance* to the Reformation as their primary response.[43] Revisionists were initially split on the effectiveness of this resistance, but the general trend has been to acknowledge that in the long run, popular

[41] Dickens, *English Reformation*.
[42] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*, 1–60; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, Part 1; Haigh, *English Reformations*, 25–55.
[43] Scarisbrick, *Reformation and the English People*; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 379–447; Haigh, *English Reformations*, 137–51; Bernard, *King's Reformation*, 73–224.