CONFLICTS
of DEVOTION

Liturgical Poetics in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England

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Introduction

Who will pray with me? Who will mourn with me? Who is my neighbor? During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the population of London doubled, as explorations of the “new world” across the Atlantic reshaped Europeans’ vision of their place in the world, as wave after wave of religious changes swept over England, and as political and religious strife turned Englishmen against each other, knowing who one’s neighbor was could be difficult. This book examines a series of attempts to rewrite English spiritual community by drawing together divided audiences in a common work of liturgy and poetic devotion from the time of Henry VIII up to the middle of the seventeenth century. In the midst of the crisis of spiritual community that erupted during the English Reformation, we can see the flowering of a new liturgical poetics energized by writers’ desires for preservation, negotiation, and extension of spiritual community, a communitarian poetics that developed alongside the increasingly polarizing tendencies of Reformation-era polemical writing.

It would be difficult to deny that Tudor and Stuart England suffered a crisis of community that began with Henry VIII’s break from Rome (and the resulting redefinition of England’s spiritual and political relationship with international Christendom), erupted into uprisings
and social unrest during the reigns of Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, ebbed in the latter half of Elizabeth’s reign and during the reign of James I, and finally exploded in the civil wars of the 1640s. Of course, any particular Englishman’s sense of the nature of, causes of, and solutions to the crisis depended upon his particular religious and political commitments. However, some kind of extraordinary reconfiguration of English Christians’ sense of a spiritual “us” seems to have been felt by nearly everyone—from yeoman to pastor to monarch—during the century and a half after the break from Rome. Some celebrated the change, some mourned it, but few were left unaffected by it.¹

Although they would attribute blame to different causes, Catholics and Protestants alike felt the shocks of social and spiritual discord that were fracturing English Christians’ sense of spiritual community in families, parishes, dioceses, the national church, and the notional international body of Christendom.² Perhaps such a sense of crisis was only natural in the uncertain early years of religious change, as the theology of the authorized religion shifted from Protestant to Catholic to Protestant again under Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, and certainly local experiences of it were neither uniform nor static.³ Still, a general sense of fracture persisted well beyond those changes, continuing beyond the end of Elizabeth’s relatively stable reign, as the hope for a broad reformed consensus dissipated and opposed confessional categories solidified.

In The Execution of Justice in England, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, accused the pope, underground priests, and recusant Roman Catholics of sowing division in England. He defended the Elizabethan government’s imprisonment and execution of recusant Catholics as a proper response to treason and fomentation of rebellion. For Burghley, the dissent of Roman Catholics (whom he portrayed as inevitably treasonous after the promulgation of Regnans in Excelsis, the papal bull pronouncing the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth I) was to blame for the continuing sense of communal fracture in the 1580s.⁴

William Allen, on the other hand, claimed that Catholics were the ones striving for unity and peace while unjust government persecution was in fact responsible for provoking discord and strife.⁵ Whoever was to blame, both sides could agree that something was rotten in the state of England and that religious discord was at the root.
Although the state could, as Burghley argued, employ lethal force to keep religious discord in check, such means were not capable of producing a stable sense of spiritual cohesion among English Christians either locally or at the level of the national church. If such spiritual unity were possible, it would require conversion rather than compulsion. Within the English church, religious reformers composed and promulgated new vernacular prayers and liturgies meant to create a new unity of worship—and thus, eventually, a unified sense of spiritual community—across the whole of England. It is easy to overlook this fact when examining the conflict and fragmentation that accompanied the English Reformation. I do not mean to deny that, as Ethan Shagan has so persuasively argued, early modern claims to moderation that now may generate “cosy connotations of equanimity and reasonableness” were inevitably linked with “coercion and control.” Yet I do maintain throughout this book that a genuine desire for spiritual communion was at the heart of the poetic participation in the reformation of English religious life that is the primary focus of this study. Desire for a more unified spiritual community led religious writers in England to attempt to remedy what they saw as a debilitating lack of unity among their countrymen and fellow Christians. It was an ambitious undertaking worth attempting to understand on its own terms, even as we continue to examine its unintended consequences.

Late medieval English religion was, in some respects, simultaneously more diverse and more unified than what emerged in the wake of the religious changes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Throughout fifteenth-century England, there was a relatively consistent theological and ritual core to the Mass, but the way it was organized and celebrated was not entirely uniform in different dioceses. The official rituals (or “use”) of the Mass changed as one traveled from region to region. Vestment colors and designs, the schedule of readings, the ceremonial movements through the church and at the altar, and even the order and wording of prayers showed different influences and traditions of development in the liturgical uses of different regions. These differences were often relatively slight from a modern perspective and were relatively well regulated by the religious authorities, but the Mass was by no means the whole of ritual life for Christians in the Middle Ages. A fifteenth-century Englishman who traveled out of his
parish for any length of time could not have helped noticing that popu-
lar traditions of mourning, religious festivals, favorite local saints, and
sometimes particularities of sacred geography and church architecture
all led to considerable liturgical variations outside of the Mass—some-
times even from parish to parish in the same diocese.⁷

This state of affairs seems not to have been distressing to most late
medieval English Christians, but it was an important part of early re-
formers’ understanding of what they were reforming. As Thomas Cran-
mer famously put it in his preface to the 1549 Book of Common Prayer,
the first full liturgical book in the vernacular that England had ever
seen, “And where, heretofore, there hath been great diversitie in saying
and synging in churches within this realme: some folowyng Salsbury
use, some Herford use, some the use of Bangor, some of Yorke, and
some of Lincolne: Now from hencefurth, all the whole realme shall
have but one use.”⁸ Cranmer’s story of the liturgical reformation was a
story not of emerging fracture but of a new unity out of earlier corrup-
tion, dispersal, and confusion. The First Edwardian Act of Uniformity
gave legal teeth to Cranmer’s liturgical aspirations, demonstrating the
importance of promoting and enforcing religious unity in the reform-
ers’ Erastian vision of English religio-political community.⁹

Strict laws, however, could as easily provoke rebellion as pro-
mote unity. Citing Aristotle’s discussions of community in the Politics,
Debora Shuger points out that a purely coercive church that did not
promote like-mindedness and benevolent friendship could never pro-
duce a true or stable community.¹⁰ Peacefully reshaping the religious
practices of local communities that had always enjoyed the freedom to
maintain diverse traditions of worship, while also inculcating the faith-
ful with the new reformed doctrine, would require new ways of writ-
ing liturgy, new rhetorical and poetic approaches to producing shared
experiences of worship and devotion suitable for the divided English
religious community. I call this new set of approaches liturgical poetics
in order to highlight the importance of both the poetic character of
liturgy—the creative poiesis required for its composition—and the
liturgical potential of poetry, its capacity to make spiritual communi-
ties out of its audiences. In an era when the “mystical body” of Western
Christendom was rapidly fragmenting, an attempt to realize spiritual
community might still begin with the creative activity of writing a litany or collect, but the authority and efficacy of new liturgical texts were far from certain for many Christians. Richard Hooker called the Book of Common Prayer “a pattern whereby to frame all other prayers,” and many religious poets in England seem to have agreed, even if their understanding of that “pattern” diverged from Hooker’s. New challenges to English spiritual community presented new possibilities for poets to reshape their audiences by resisting or supplementing the authorized liturgies. If godly English divines like Cranmer could rewrite the Mass, then why shouldn’t inspired English poets compose new litanies, or even sing new psalms?

The liturgical poetics that emerged in the early revisions of the Book of Common Prayer, while sometimes hotly contested, was deeply influential for the generations that came after. Indeed, the Tudor/Stuart Prayerbook can fairly be said to have had the deepest and most lasting effect on British religious culture of any single liturgical book in English, even into the present day. Timothy Rosendale has persuasively argued that the influence of the vernacular Prayerbook was at least as powerful and persistent as that of the vernacular Bible. I am inclined to agree with his evaluation, and would add that the Prayerbook’s influence was indirectly intensified even as it was refashioned in the rich body of early modern English spiritual literature that employs liturgical poetics outside of a literally liturgical context.

At the risk of putting it crudely, we might say that the new vernacular liturgical texts that emerged during the reigns of Henry VIII and his children provided standard authorized “scripts” for both public and private religious practice for generations of English Christians. They offered a new model of reformed spiritual experience, new ways of confronting death and joining in spiritual communion with one’s fellow Christians. These liturgical texts demanded participation even as they studiously avoided requiring precise theological agreement on many contentious questions. Their carefully crafted rhetoric was designed to produce a new, unified, English and Christian “we” through the performance of vernacular communal rituals. The whole of the vernacular Prayerbook was aligned with this social goal, but I would suggest that the changes made to the rituals for Communion and burial had the
most immediate and profound impact upon English notions of spiritual community. The promise and problems evident in these attempts to rewrite the English church at its most crucial moment of sacramental realization and at its most contested and painful boundary could not help but perplex and inspire English writers who attended or led Prayerbook services—or else paid dearly for their refusal to do so.

Attending to the liturgical poetics of the *Book of Common Prayer* thus offers a useful vantage point for a fresh look at early modern religious writing, bringing into focus the many ways in which English Christians attempted to engage problems of spiritual community generated by the English Reformation. While the writers examined in this book all shared a common goal of promoting spiritual community in their poetry, there is a noticeable shift of emphasis over time from earlier attempts to remediate problems of memory and mourning (as the Elizabethan church sought to settle its turn away from the beliefs and rituals of the past), to later struggles with the boundaries of the church itself (as confessional divisions deepened and as hope for a unified earthly community of Christians waned in the seventeenth century). My study begins with a close analysis of the 1559 Prayerbook’s texts for Communion and burial, then turns to examine various forms of liturgical poetics in the lyric poetry of Edmund Spenser, Robert Southwell, John Donne, George Herbert, and Richard Crashaw. In every case, we find writers who struggled against religious fragmentation, who marshaled all of the linguistic force they could to write a way out of the crisis of spiritual community dividing the English and dividing England from the larger body of Western Christendom.

The first chapter focuses on the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*—the liturgical centerpiece of the Elizabethan “settlement”—to illuminate two key rhetorical goals that informed its liturgical poetics: accommodation and exclusion. The first of these, rhetorical accommodation, is exemplified by the language of Eucharistic reception in the Prayerbook’s rite for the Holy Communion. The compilers of the 1559 Prayerbook ambiguously combined two conflicting theological discourses in an attempt to make the Holy Communion spiritually palatable to a broad swath of the conformist congregation, in spite of their varying religious commitments. However, the communal and mystical implications of
this rhetoric of accommodation were, in practice, far more interesting to religious poets than the pastoral/political expediencies of the Prayerbook. The second goal is exemplified by the Order for the Burial of the Dead, which seeks to turn the affect of mourners away from the deceased and toward the Christian community in this world. While this rite left more room for traditional passions and practices than many reformers approved of, the general emphasis of the Elizabethan church on instruction of the bereaved—rather than traditional ritual mourning and memorialization—opened a significant gap in English funeral culture just waiting to be filled. The liturgical poetics at work in the 1559 Prayerbook—its strategic deployment of accommodation and exclusion—produced a range of unintended linguistic and spiritual consequences with which literary authors would grapple for at least a century. After the foundational chapter on the 1559 Book of Common Prayer, the study explores the ways in which these rhetorics of accommodation and exclusion are deployed, explored, challenged, and expanded by both Protestant and Roman Catholic writers in England.

The second chapter focuses on Edmund Spenser’s major pastoral elegies, Daphnaïda, the November eclogue in The Shepheardes Calendar, Astrophel, and The Doleful Lay of Clorinda, in order to illuminate his struggle with the seeming inadequacy of the authorized rhetoric of didactic exclusion in Elizabethan mourning. This chapter argues that Spenser sensed a poetic opportunity in the consolatory insufficiency of the Order for the Burial of the Dead and seized that opportunity by attempting to establish elegiac poetry as the best reformed replacement for the traditional liturgical forms of communal mourning and consolation that had been suppressed by the Elizabethan church.

The third chapter focuses on the English Jesuit Robert Southwell, who found himself on the losing side of the Roman/Reformed divide in Elizabethan England and was executed for his part in the Jesuit mission. Like Spenser, Southwell saw poetic opportunities in the Elizabethan church’s spare treatment of mourning and memorialization. Southwell redeployed the rhetorical exclusions of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer in poems designed to preserve and promote traditional habits of religious memorial devotion and traditional attitudes toward the Communion of Saints in audiences far broader than those that could be
reached by polemical theology or his clandestine sacramental ministry in England. Thus I argue that even as tenacious an opponent of the Elizabethan church as Robert Southwell was deeply influenced by the Prayerbook’s liturgical poetics.

The fourth chapter shifts the focus from mourning what was lost to attempts at poetic reconstitution of spiritual communion. I begin with a close examination of John Donne’s poetic extensions of the Prayerbook’s rhetorical accommodation, in which he characteristically harnesses multiple opposing voices to generate bewildering semantic excess. Donne uses this excessive accommodation to produce mystical communities out of the geographically and theologically dispersed readers of his devotional poetry. Examining both his explicitly religious and his ostensibly profane poetry, this chapter argues that Donne’s lyrics were both more communitarian and more mystical than literary scholars have tended to recognize. This argument not only offers new insights into Donne’s devotional poetry but also seeks to expand our understanding of the communal character of much “metaphysical” poetry.

The fifth chapter demonstrates the anxious oscillation between accommodation and exclusion that structures the introductory sections of George Herbert’s *The Temple*. Herbert’s book portrays itself as an instrument for quasi-liturgical communal reading practice more explicitly than most of the other works examined in this study. However, it is also far more ambivalent about the possibility of community formation through devotional reading. Especially in the book’s framing devices and its treatment of the Eucharist, we can see an important contrast to the literary optimism of the other poets that I discuss. I argue that much that is seemingly contradictory in the opening sections of *The Temple* can best be understood as an anxiously parochial representation of the troubling dynamics of accommodation and exclusion active in the formation and maintenance of an English liturgical community striving to be true to the letter and spirit of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

The final chapter explores the ways in which, in spite of his conversion to Roman Catholicism, many of Richard Crashaw’s lyrics reflect his spiritual upbringing and ministry within the Stuart church. Crashaw’s poetry offers a deeply troubled but ultimately transcendent meditation on the communitarian potential of the rhetorical accommo-
dation authorized by the liturgies that molded his spiritual sensibilities throughout his youth and his time as a priest in the English church. This final chapter sheds light on a persistent hope that liturgical poetics in devotional poetry could heal the deep fractures in the national (and international) community of Christians even as England spiraled toward the civil war that resulted in Crashaw’s exile and conversion to Roman Catholicism. Although Crashaw’s vision of a unified and tolerant spiritual community was not to be realized in his lifetime, it is a vision worth careful consideration as religious tensions continue to provoke violence in our time.

In each of the liturgical texts and poems included in my study, I find that the same ideas and ways of speaking dividing the soul of England, and thus the audiences of English poets, were reshaped into varieties of liturgical poetics meant to preserve or renew communal spiritual bonds in the midst of that division. As St. Augustine observed in his *Confessions* (in the passage that is the second epigraph to this book), speaking many things to many audiences in a single text is not necessarily duplicitous equivocation but may in fact be prophetic utterance. The attempt to craft a liturgical poetics that could overcome the crisis of community in Reformation England was undertaken in a wide variety of ways by writers who were themselves rooted in, formed by, and committed to the messy business of religious life in an imperfect world. Their writing struggles to find a voice that could reach the divided, and often antagonistic, audiences to whom they were compelled by art and faith to speak.

Much excellent work on the interdependency of religion and literature in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England has emerged in the years since Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti famously pointed out a trend that they described as a “turn to religion” in early modern studies. They rightly portray the work of scholars like Debora Shuger and Julia Lupton as both a provocation to take religion seriously on its own terms and an exemplar of just how illuminating rigorous attention to the “otherness” of early modern religion (and, as Lupton has emphasized, our own unrecognized entanglements with that “other”) can be for literary critics and historians. Shuger’s call to focus more scholarly attention on the religious alterity of early modern “gender, sexuality,
class, power, and selfhood” has had such a profound impact on literary studies in the last two decades that, as Gregory Kneidel dryly observed, “it is now difficult to find a book on religion and early modern literature that does not engage these questions.”15 Kneidel’s book “rethinks” the “turn to religion” by focusing on the “Pauline universality” that Lupton placed in constructive tension with alterity criticism. I will not attempt a full survey of the field here, but I will suggest that this tension between alterity and universality is a useful schema for understanding the current state of affairs in the scholarship on early modern English literature.

In the introduction to a recent collection of essays on Shakespeare and religion, Jackson and Marotti again address the “turn to religion,” aligning scholarship focused on alterity with historically focused scholarship and aligning scholarship focused on universality with theoretically focused scholarship. They argue that “both theory-centered interpretation and more distinctly historical scholarship are on the cusp, as it were, of developing a new and surprisingly compatible understanding . . . that challenges the still standard Enlightenment divisions between the religious and the secular, faith and reason, the transcendent and the immanent.”16 It is not entirely clear whether the convergence observed by Jackson and Marotti is best understood as a deconstructive collapse of binary categories, as a Hegelian approach to dialectical transcendence, or as something quite other. However, I do think that the best recent work on religion and literature has sought to account for both the alterity and the universality of early modern literature in ways that dissolve a clear distinction between sacred and secular.

Some examples published within the year or two before the writing of this introduction will illuminate the diversity of ways in which this work is being carried out. David Loewenstein’s rich study of heresy in early modern literature and culture generally maintains a tight historical focus on the violent potential of early modern anxieties about the boundaries of religious community, but his use of Jean Delumeau’s more general category of “religious fear” and his commentary in the introduction and conclusion ensure that the “universal” implications of his study are never far beneath the surface.17 Brooke Conti’s Confessions of Faith illuminates a series of strange eruptions of autobiographi-
cal statements within polemical writing that both reveal and conceal the incommensurability of Reformation-era spiritual experience with the calcifying confessional categories of seventeenth-century polemics. Her study enriches both our recognition of the strangeness of early modern polemic and our awareness of a nascent “modern” spiritual experience that does not align comfortably with the theological language of the religious establishment. More overtly political and theoretical in its approach, Nandra Perry’s *Imitatio Christi* illustrates both the historical particularity of early modern *imitatio* as a way of life responsive to the spiritual crises of the English Reformation and more universal, humanistic concerns about the limitations of language and the agency of the individual that resonate with twentieth-century discussions of the emergent public sphere. Even more explicitly engaged with the recent surge of interest in “political theology” sparked by the work of Shuger and Lupton is Jennifer R. Rust’s *The Body in Mystery*. Her reexamination of early modern developments in the theology of the *corpus mysticum* clarifies the way in which it was “a primary premodern category of social belonging” while also making a compelling argument for the continuing relevance of a sense of sacramental communion to the putatively secular modern notion of the commonwealth. All of these notable recent studies of early modern religion and literature contribute to a growing sense that the “secularization thesis,” which understands early modern literature as displacing religion in a clear step toward the secularization of Western culture, is in need of serious qualification.

Although I did not set out to write a challenge to the “secularization thesis,” my study of liturgical poetics does end up implicitly questioning prevailing narratives of secularization, while also resisting accounts of early modern political theology that pay more attention to systematic theological or political writing than to the aesthetics of religious literature. Whether this book should be considered a study of “political theology” (as influentially defined in the recent collection of essays edited by Graham Hammill and Julia Lupton) or not, I do wish to contribute to the development of a “formal and phenomenological accounting” that can better account for “the successive claims for attention, acknowledgement, resistance, and reform by means of which religion keeps surviving its various modern overcomings.”
One important reason why I hesitate to describe this as a study of political theology is that, in spite of the fact that some of the writers discussed in this book have been important to our understanding of political theology, once I move beyond the Book of Common Prayer itself the particular aspects of liturgical poetics that I examine here generally aim to escape both politics and theology as such. The poets on whom this book focuses do make use of political and theological discourses, but only as instruments for accomplishing spiritual work that they understood not only to fall outside the horizon of politics and theology, but even to transcend early modern anxieties about significations. Liturgical poetics is, at least for the writers I discuss in this book, a way of doing rather than meaning. It is responsive to the crisis in which “political theology” emerges, but its focus is the making of spiritual community itself. Perhaps this would fall under a broad definition of “political theology” after all, or perhaps in the end it is just what Hammill and Lupton call “religion.”

Still, I am deeply indebted to scholars like Shuger and Lupton for their work to more firmly situate our understanding of early modern literature, religion, and society within the transcendent horizon presumed by most writers and readers at the time. To fully understand the kinds of community-making language at work in liturgical writing, for example, one must retain a clear sense of the complex interpenetration of the earthly and spiritual communities assumed by early modern Christians. Perhaps the most important locus classicus for the relation of heavenly and earthly communities in Christian thought is St. Augustine’s famous discussion of the relationship between the “city of man” and the “city of God.” As he articulated it, there are “two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, the cities which we find, as I have said, interwoven, as it were, in this present transitory world, and mingled with one another.” These two cities are “intermingled” but still distinct from one another in both character and ends: “[These] two cities, different and mutually opposed, owe their existence to the fact that some men live by the standard of the flesh, others by the standard of the spirit. It can now be seen that we may also put it in this way: that some live by man’s standard, others by God’s.” The simultaneity, or interwovenness, of these two “cities” in temporal and physical terms does
not prevent a clear and crucial recognition of their differences from one another in Augustine’s analysis, and neither should it prevent us from acknowledging the reality of the “earthly city,” whose ambitions and coercions did play an important part in the formation of English religious culture, while still pursuing a more subtle understanding of the “heavenly city” in which writers like Cranmer, Spenser, Southwell, Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw were attempting spiritually to dwell, and into which they were attempting poetically to clear pathways for those who would read their liturgical and lyrical texts.

This study therefore maintains a strong sense of the ways in which the variety of concerns that play out in early modern spiritual writing may be fully understood only when we take into account the spiritual dimensions of Elizabethan and Jacobean Christians’ social experiences. Debora Shuger put it well when she argued that “religion is . . . not simply politics in disguise, a set of beliefs that represent and legitimate the social order by grounding it in the Absolutes,” and that “religious belief is ‘about’ God and the soul as much as it is ‘about’ the sociopolitical order. Whether or not one believes in the former two entities, one gains very little by assuming that the culture under investigation did not itself comprehend the essential nature of its preoccupations.”

Like Shuger, I read religious literature not to demystify it or reduce it to mere political ambition or psychological compulsion (though such things likely do play at least some role in the production of most religious literature) but rather to clarify for modern readers—regardless of their own beliefs—the zealously spiritual writing of zealously spiritual persons. This study, while attempting to remain cognizant of the political dimension of religious life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thus chooses to err on the side of what its subjects might have called charity with regard to the sincerity of their belief that religion is prior to politics, both temporally in the life of a person and metaphysically in the order of reality. This includes pursuing the implications of their writing within a conceptual framework that presumes the existence of a spiritual realm that, as the saying goes, “always-already” implicates human beings in its moral, soteriological, and eschatological economies.

Fundamental to the social view of early modern Christianity of nearly all types was the sense that spiritual unity of one kind or another
ought to exist not only among Christians in this world but also among all those who belong to the “body of Christ,” whether they are in this world or the next. Although the early modern interest in building and maintaining a sense of spiritual community played out in any number of contexts, from litanies and processions, to nonliturgical preaching, to domestic prayer, spiritual reading, and psalm singing, the most obvious texts for the physical enactment of spiritual society, the communal fleshing out of the “heavenly city,” may be found in the various liturgies that brought English people together—whether willingly or unwillingly—to worship, to celebrate, and to mourn.

For this reason, I begin my study with a close consideration of liturgical texts to identify some of the ways in which spiritual community came to be formulated by Elizabeth’s religious establishment in one of the most ubiquitous religious books of the period: the *Book of Common Prayer*. The focus here is not only on developing a better picture of how religious community was represented in the Elizabethan liturgies but also especially on recognizing some of the most spiritually problematic features of the Prayerbook’s liturgical language in its treatment of two of the rituals most obviously concerned with questions of community: Holy Communion and the burial of the dead. The theological formulations of the Communion and burial language of the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer* present a set of authoritative responses to essentially communal questions that remained unresolved in English spiritual life during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite countless elaborations of law and doctrine designed to regulate communal belief and religious practice in England.

My research therefore has broad implications not only for the study of early modern literature and culture but also for our understanding of the language and literature of religious community more generally. Reading through the lens of liturgical poetics, my work challenges studies that have underemphasized the mystical concerns of the poetry that emerged out of the fractures resulting from the English Reformation and, in so doing, allows us to recognize what fertile grounds those very social and religious fractures provided for early modern lyric poets determined to revitalize their spiritual communities with songs of consolation and songs of devotion.
In addition to engaging the tension between alterity and universality that has energized much recent scholarship on religion and literature in early modern England, this study engages with a longer arc of scholarship exemplified by an earlier body of literary history and criticism. Two of the most influential twentieth-century approaches to understanding religious literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were exemplified in the work of Louis L. Martz and Barbara Lewalski. Their work may be most usefully distinguished by their opposing emphases on Christian interpermeability and “catholicity” (Martz) and confessional distinctiveness (Lewalski). In some ways, Jackson and Marotti’s interest in the tension between alterity and universality echoes the tensions between the accounts of Lewalski and Martz.

In *The Poetry of Meditation*, Martz sought to demonstrate the relative permeability of religious categories in early modern spirituality by developing more fully Helen C. White’s argument for the powerful influence that continental—and mostly Roman Catholic—spiritual writing had upon religious literature in England. While White focused on devotional prose writing, Martz extended the argument to the so-called “metaphysical” poets. Martz placed a great deal of emphasis upon the structures of meditation articulated in devotional manuals like St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, locating similar structures in the poems of a wide range of writers, including poets who were generally not thought of as leaning toward the Catholic end of the confessional spectrum, such as George Herbert. Explicitly challenging Martz’s emphasis upon continental and Catholic sources for English Protestant devotional modes, Barbara Lewalski proposed a model for early modern English poetics informed more by “contemporary, English and Protestant influences than [by] Counter Reformation, continental, and medieval Catholic resources.” In Lewalski’s view, these “influences” were characteristically Bible centered and therefore distinctively Protestant. Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of whether Lewalski’s assertion that biblicism was primarily the domain of Protestants is accurate (I address some of the difficulties with that argument in chapter 3), we ought to recognize that her attempt to erect clear boundaries between English Protestant poetry and Catholic devotional literature encouraged the flourishing of a more refined body of scholarship.
uncovering the breathtaking complexity of aesthetic and religious modes that fall under that seemingly simple category “Protestant”—certainly an important development.

However, in part because of this increasing focus upon the diversity of religious beliefs and practices active in post-Reformation England, it has become clear in the last few decades that attempting to confine religious poets within sharp confessional boundaries often does more to cloud our understanding of their writing than to clarify it. Although relatively few literary scholars have explicitly or trenchantly rejected Lewalski’s model, as I noted above, recent scholarship has tended to be less interested in delineating a single distinctive “Protestant poetics” than in shedding light on the diverse, hybrid, and often conflicted, religious valences of post-Reformation English literature. 31

As literary scholars’ historical and theological understanding has grown more nuanced, however, new challenges have emerged. Among them is the increasing difficulty of formulating analytical terms appropriate to the divergent modes of belief and practice that influenced religious writers. Problematic terms like Protestant, Catholic, Puritan, and Anglican are now generally understood to be much less reliable than was previously assumed. Individual English Christians, and perhaps especially the sorts of Christians who write devotional poetry, do not often fall entirely within a tidy confessional category. Scholars working in the field now tend to maintain a felicitous sense of the messiness that characterized much religious life in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. I would suggest that the careful complication of religious categories undertaken by historians and literary scholars in the last few decades has vindicated Martz’s sense of the porousness of confessional boundaries within the realm of religious literature, but with a somewhat broader sense of the sources and pathways of mutual influence. 32

My study is thus interested in shedding more light on the complicated spiritual tensions and interrelationships at work in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious poetry. I do this by engaging each of the texts under consideration at crucial liminal points where the attempt to negotiate among competing senses of spiritual community gives rise to ingenious appropriations of the languages of theological division in service of communal reconstruction through liturgical poetics.
One might argue that “communal reconstruction” is a naive or tendentious way of talking about what the compilers of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer and the poets examined in this study were attempting to do. In the last decade, along with the more general “turn to religion,” there has been a minor resurgence of interest in liturgy as a proper subject of literary analysis, but the terms of the discussion have often been less positive. Richard Helgerson’s treatment of the Prayerbook as entirely an instrument of coercive ideological power designed to serve the interests of the absolutist state is a strong example of this tendency.

Approaching the English Prayerbook with only slightly less suspicion, Ramie Targoff’s seminal Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England issued an important challenge to the typical alignment of Protestantism with the elevation of individuality and interiority over exteriority and collectivity. Targoff argues that late medieval Catholic worship was more individualistic and interiorized than early modern English Protestant worship, which emphasized conscious participation in vernacular ceremonies to replace the highly individualized devotions encouraged in primers for the laity at Mass during the late Middle Ages. Targoff takes a relatively moderate tack with regard to the political character of the Prayerbook, asserting that we ought not to regard it as an exclusively political instrument; however, her approach still emphasizes the ways in which the Prayerbook may be seen as a covert coercive instrument of the Elizabethan religious establishment: “Behind the introduction of a liturgy emphasizing the worshippers’ active participation and consent lies the establishment’s overarching desire to shape personal faith through public and standardized forms.” Targoff’s approach is laudable for taking seriously the distinctly spiritual aims of the authors and compilers of the Prayerbook, and especially for noticing the impact of the Prayerbook upon English devotional sensibilities more broadly, but does not account fully for the deep ambivalence about the relationship between private belief and public practice exhibited in many parts of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer.

In Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England, Timothy Rosendale addresses this question in his attempt to get beyond reductive depictions of the Prayerbook as an instrument of political or ecclesiastical coercion, arguing that a profound tension between
public and private beliefs and practices is woven into the very fabric of the Prayerbook. Rosendale sees the Prayerbook as embodying, in its very forms and language, a characteristic post-Reformation attempt to negotiate between a felt necessity for public unity and a tentative sense of the desirability of private multiplicity. Rosendale argues that the Prayerbook’s attempt to reformulate this relationship between public and private, interior and exterior, “played an important role in reconstituting the terms in which it was possible to think about reading, individuality, and England itself.” He maintains that the Prayerbook attempts to solve a set of religio-political problems created by the production of vernacular Bibles and that it may serve scholars today as a key to understanding the most important social and spiritual tensions of early modern England, tensions that inform the works of English writers from Sidney and Shakespeare to Milton and Hobbes.

This ambitious attempt to see in the Book of Common Prayer both the undisputed fact that, “amid the chaos of contemporary European politics and the burgeoning multiplicity of unruly English individualisms, liturgical form was a creative assertion of temporal, political, and social order” and the less widely recognized fact that “Prayerbook theology and worship . . . allows—indeed, encourages and demands—a crucially individual authority in religious life and activity” is a necessary development in our understanding of the authorized English liturgies’ relevance to more obviously “literary” writing. If we accept Rosendale’s analysis, we must recognize that to study the relationship between the Book of Common Prayer and English literature is not primarily to locate linguistic echoes or borrowings of liturgical language and imagery by English writers but rather to analyze the Prayerbook’s deeper conceptual and semiotic “matrices” (as Rosendale calls them), or ways of formulating responses to the basic social, spiritual, and linguistic questions of the post-Reformation era, to which the Prayerbook gave seminal literary expression, and in which the writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could not help but participate in one way or another.

The most recent major study focused on the literary implications of the English Prayerbook, Daniel Swift’s Shakespeare’s Common Prayers, is even closer to my own approach than Rosendale’s insightful study.
Swift’s examination of Shakespeare’s literary engagement with the *Book of Common Prayer’s* rites of matrimony, communion, and baptism understands the Prayerbook as the product of complex social negotiations and the source of both communal identity and spiritual struggle. Swift’s book exhibits a nuanced literary understanding of the Prayerbook, and it draws persuasive connections between the liturgical texts of the English church and the writing of the greatest dramatist to worship in that church. Swift pursues his study as a focused, historical exploration of Shakespeare’s personal fascination with the Prayerbook up to around 1604. The close focus on Shakespeare that is one of the merits of *Shakespeare’s Common Prayers* also proves to be one of its limitations, however. Swift’s penetrating focus is admirable, but it does limit his discussion of the broader patterns of response to the Reformation-era crisis of community in England. The breadth of this study, while it cannot provide as detailed an examination of any one author, allows us to recognize a broader pattern of developments in the history of liturgical poetics. I hope that this broader analysis will open the ground for even more focused research into the great variety of writers and liturgical texts that have shaped post-Reformation understandings of spiritual community.

One key idea about which Swift and I agree: vernacular liturgical texts did not merely offer a storehouse of felicitous phrases to English writers or a flawed instrument of social control to Elizabethan officials. For Christian audiences, the new liturgies also opened up new ways of thinking and writing about one’s place in a spiritual community that infinitely exceeded the boundaries of kingdom or empire. While Rosenendale places greatest emphasis on concepts of representation implicit in the Prayerbook, following out their implications into the social and political spheres, I focus more directly upon the textual nuances of the *Book of Common Prayer’s* ways of articulating and negotiating divided community in the crucial rites of Communion and burial because the tensions that we find there, rather than producing relatively stable solutions to the social problems of post-Reformation England as Rosenendale argues, in fact reflect persistent forms of communal irresolution that the poets of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries sought to overcome in their literary writing.
Lyric poems are not usually liturgical in the most literal sense: they are not (for the most part) meant to be used as instructions for the physical and public enactment of religious rituals. However, they are often liturgical in their attempts to generate new shared spiritual practices that bring readers into communal experiences of the divine. Although they are not literally liturgical “scripts,” devotional poems are common scripts for individual performances by readers, who may become through their shared experiences a new kind of community. Thus I would maintain that all of the lyric texts examined in this study are sincere attempts—using relatively noncoercive means—to rebuild a sense of spiritual community that had been damaged by the religious turmoil of the early sixteenth century. This shared literary pursuit of spiritual unity cannot be fully understood by means of empirical documentary evidence but may be glimpsed in the interplay of accommodation and exclusion in poems produced by writers caught up together in, in spite of being divided by, a common set of spiritual problems.

Attention to writers’ ways of imagining their communities structures most of my discussion of both community and audience in the following chapters. My diction here might remind some readers of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, one of the late twentieth century’s most influential studies of the dynamics of power at work in the formation of nationalist communities, but the questions I have in view are rather different from Anderson’s concerns. Anderson is most interested in the development of imperialist and nationalist power structures out of the combination of large social/material shifts such as the decline of privileged textual languages (e.g., Latin) and strong monarchs, or the flourishing of vernacular print and capitalism. These are not the concerns of this project, though Anderson and I do share an interest in the ways notional communities emerge and are put to use. While my work does have implications for how we understand the early development of pluralist modes of thinking and writing, the main trajectory of this study is toward a more nuanced examination of spiritual senses of Christian community, spiritual senses that often stand in opposition to nationalist ideologies by proposing a transcendent “us” of which the nation or commonwealth is at best a dim reflection. This
transcendent community was a primary locus of communal identity, individual loyalty, and ethical action with which any emergent nationalism would have to contend.

The texts examined in this study were most emphatically not, however, produced by people who thought of themselves as standing in radical opposition to the political authorities. All of the writers that I will discuss considered themselves to be perfectly loyal subjects of the English monarch—including even Robert Southwell, whose protestations of perfect loyalty to Elizabeth I did not save him from being executed for treason. These writers did not articulate antinationalist or antimonarchical theories but instead attempted to work out ways of engaging their imagined audiences that could sustain religious community in spite of the deepening confessional divides that separated English Christians from one another in spirit, and even (in the case of exiles to the Continent or the Americas) in body.

Implicit in these literary endeavors are the cultural seeds of attitudes toward mourning and religious pluralism that persist even into our own time, though the vines that have sprung from those seeds have often produced fruits that might not have suited the tastes of the writers who planted them. Literary scholars who are beginning to focus more carefully on the cultural impact of the peculiar ways of representing and shaping spiritual community found in the liturgy and lyrics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are only just starting to be able to discern the complicated lines of influence that liturgical poetics had upon the English imagination. My stake in this newly expanding field is to convey the surprising ways in which much early modern poetry was crafted not only to reflect upon the culture of worship out of which it arose but also to reshape that culture. Most remarkable is how often writers attempted to accomplish that reshaping using the very same threads of language that were dividing them. This book is a close examination of how English Christian writers who were all, in one way or another, religious conformists sought to fill in the gaps left by the radical spiritual shifts of the sixteenth century. Although their beliefs and styles of writing were diverse, they shared a common goal: forging anew the fractured English spiritual community in the fire of poetic devotion.
A Note on Confessional Terminology

No terms for identity categories will ever be without their problems, but one can hardly write of the Reformation era without adopting some confessional terms. In general, I have tried to use terms that reflect the perspectives that I see at work in a particular text or writer. This means that I have not imposed a single set of terms throughout the whole of this study and have instead adopted a variety of terms with different connotations in an attempt to align the terms of analysis with the attitudes to religious groupings implicit in whichever set of texts I am examining.

When discussing early modern religious writing, one cannot help but encounter the difficulty involved in naming and describing the broad and ever-changing spectrum of confessional groups, modes of belief, and types of religious practice at work in England after the Reformation. As countless historians and literary scholars have argued in the scholarship of the last several decades, commonly recognized terms like Puritan, Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic are all problematic because the terms themselves invest one in claims about the religious topography of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that are often inaccurate.

For example, Anglican in the sense that it is often used today, a sense informed by Restoration-era emphasis upon ceremonialism and via media theologies, is not at all an adequate term for the peculiar forms of episcopalian Calvinism that were dominant in Elizabeth’s church and still strong in England during the early decades of the seventeenth century. Using the term Anglican to describe the official Elizabethan religion is anachronistic enough to distort the subject one is trying to describe. Similarly, Puritan was often used as a pejorative term by those who wished to portray more zealous or less traditional Christians as somehow outside of the proper religious community, and thus the use of that term tends to conceal the prevalence of zealous Calvinist beliefs among clearly establishment religious figures such as Archbishop Cranmer. Protestant was a term originally used to describe a particular set of German princes after their opposition to Charles V and only slowly came to be a catch-all term for Western Christians who were not Roman Catholic; thus it could be considered anachronistic. The capitalized term Catholic, while neither pejorative nor necessarily
anachronistic, is usually meant to refer to Roman Catholics, even though we ought to acknowledge that one would have been hard pressed to find an English Christian who did not consider himself to be a part of the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Diarmaid MacCulloch put it well in his magisterial study of the era: “The word ‘Catholic’ is the linguistic equivalent of a Russian doll. It may describe the whole Christian Church founded two thousand years ago in Palestine, or the western half of the Church which split from mainstream eastern Christianity a thousand years ago, or that part of the western half which remained loyal to the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) after the sixteenth century, or a Protestant European Christian who thought that the Bishop of Rome was Antichrist, or a modern ‘Anglo-Catholic’ faction within the Anglican Communion.”\(^4\) Granting the title of “Catholic” only to Roman Catholics in a sense places one in the position of implicitly taking one side in the dispute over the nature of the true church, but the usage is so common on all sides today that it is hard to avoid.\(^4\) As soon as one begins naming, one finds oneself enmeshed in the very controversies one is trying to describe.

Even the somewhat less loaded and more descriptive terms traditionalist, reformist, Reformed, and evangelical—terms that I use at various points in this study—sometimes run the risk of falling into new anachronisms by attempting to avoid old ones. The more closely one examines the positions staked out on the Elizabethan and Jacobean spectrum of beliefs by complicated and contradictory human beings, the less one can hope for terms that will accurately express the relevant similarities among believers without obscuring at least some crucial differences. Thus, in order to avoid confusion as much as possible, I will briefly describe what I mean by the terms for religious groups, movements, and sensibilities that I use in this study, in the hope that my uses of terms will do more to illuminate than to obscure the religious dynamics at work in the texts I am analyzing.

The four most common terms that I use to denote religious groups are traditionalist, reformist, Catholic, and Protestant. I generally employ versions of the first two terms in sections focused on texts produced by writers who were not Roman Catholic (who generally employed more subtle terms of difference to distinguish among various
shades of Christianity) and the second two in sections focused on texts produced by writers who were Roman Catholic (who were aware of the various shades of Protestant belief but generally treated them with less precision). However, when the word Protestant appears as a non-pejorative self-descriptor in the context of a writer’s own work—as is the case with Spenser—I do not hesitate to use it as well. Taking this approach allows my analysis to stand, as much as possible, within the frame of reference active within a particular set of texts, which serves to highlight most clearly the ways of representing or producing community most distinctive of those texts. Thus I even go so far as to use pejorative terms like papist, puritan, and heretic if they best capture the shade of pejorative identification at work in a text. The use of these terms should be taken, not to suggest my approval of their implications, but rather as a means of allowing some descriptive license in cases where it seems necessary to maintain a clear sense of what a writer is attempting to do in a particular poem. Finally, when I use the terms Protestant and Catholic, I will use them in the common modern way as shorthand for “Roman Catholic” and “Western Christian who is not Roman Catholic.” Most of the terms that I use should be reasonably accurate when considered in their particular contexts and should not require extensive qualification. I will, however, briefly discuss the less common or obvious confessional terms that I employ throughout this study.

The term traditionalist is not merely an oblique way of saying “Roman Catholic”; instead, it refers to a region on the spectrum of belief that could be inhabited by people who held a wide variety of beliefs on questions such as the proper authority of the bishop of Rome but who generally retained a significant amount of theological or emotional loyalty to the “old ways”—that is, to the modes of belief and practice characteristic of late medieval English Christianity. Using this term accounts for the fact that, especially in the sixteenth century, one did not need to accede to all of the theological and jurisdictional claims of Roman Catholicism to retain a lively belief in something like transubstantiation, or purgatory, or the efficacy of prayers for the dead. I also use traditionalist as an adjective describing any particular belief that might generally be associated with either medieval Christianity or the vision of Roman Catholicism articulated by the Council of Trent.
Thus a devoted and zealous member of the official English religion after 1558 might still be described as holding or expressing “traditionalist” sensibilities on one or more specific questions. This way of speaking is necessary if one wants to avoid erasing the real complexities involved in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian faith, where it was common enough to retain a fair number of “traditional” beliefs, while still clearly aligning oneself with either Reformed or Lutheran beliefs about many fundamental questions.

Similarly, reformist is a broad term referring to a region on the spectrum of belief inhabited by people whose trajectory was away from the “old ways” and toward some version of the emergent theologies founded on the writings of figures like Luther, Zwingli, Melanchthon, Bucer, and Calvin. I also employ reformist as an adjective to describe particular beliefs or attitudes proposed or exhibited by Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, et cetera, but not necessarily severing one from Roman Catholicism. Expressing one or more reformist beliefs or preferences would not necessarily or definitively align one against the “old ways” or Roman Catholicism any more than holding a traditionalist position on, say, the proper vestments for ministers to wear would automatically make one a Roman Catholic. I occasionally use the term evangelical to describe a religiously zealous, but not generally politically radical, subset of these reformists. I often use the term Reformed to more precisely distinguish between “evangelical” Lutheranism and the theological ground (deeply influenced by but often not identical to Calvinism) that English churchmen from Cranmer to Donne believed themselves (more or less) to share and presumed to be the essential identity of the official religion in England during the reigns of Edward VI, Elizabeth I, and James I.