

JOHN BOSSY

John Antony Bossy

30 April 1933 – 23 October 2015

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1993

by

SIMON DITCHFIELD

Summary. By placing human relations at the centre of his interpretation of religion, Bossy transformed our understanding of the transition from medieval to modern Christianity. His focus on the social history of the sacraments caused him to argue for a profound shift from Christianity being conceived as a community of believers to its being understood in terms of rival confessions of belief. However, he began as a conventional ‘political’ historian of Elizabethan Roman Catholicism, and was later to return to this theme in two books on how the English state used espionage to monitor the threat posed by this minority.

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John Kossy

On the flyleaf to the back cover of the last book published by the subject of this memoir in his lifetime: *Under the Molehill: An Elizabethan Spy Story* (2001), one finds the following lapidary statement:

John Bossy was born in London in 1933 and educated mainly by the Second World War, the Society of Jesus and the University of Cambridge.

For reasons that will become apparent from the memoir that follows, I believe this can only have been penned by the author himself. In the compass of a single sentence, John Bossy points to what he regarded as the three most formative influences on his character and approach to life: the trauma of wartime evacuation, Jesuit pedagogy (with its emphasis on debate and argument), and the importance of academic discipline and rigour. The flyleaf author biography continues:

Since then he has lived and lectured in London and Belfast, has been a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and from 1979 until 2000 was professor of history at the University of York. His books include *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* and *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* as well as *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair*.

Reading this today, one is struck by the fact that John's was a career that included just three academic posts: lecturer at Goldsmith's University of London; lecturer then Reader at Queen's University Belfast which coincided with the Troubles in Northern Ireland; followed by over twenty years in York as professor. Over the course of his career, at least according to this summary cv, John spent just one year abroad, at the IAS in Princeton (1976–77), but it was an important one as we shall see. At least as reflected in the titles and dates of John's books, it would appear that his research interests can be neatly divided into two phases: the first ending in c. 1985 marked by an interest in the social history of religion, specifically early modern Roman Catholicism, both English and West European; the second bookended by the publication, a decade apart, of two books on espionage in Elizabethan London. However, several additional facts sit awkwardly with such a straightforward narrative: firstly, the topic of his PhD from 1961, 'Elizabethan Catholicism – the link with France', was much closer in content and approach to his last two books than it was to his first two (a return to origins confirmed by the book project that occupied him in his retirement from 2000 until his death: a study of Elizabeth I's 'favourite catholic' Lord Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, 1540–1614). Secondly, in addition to the year spent in Princeton, John had spent five months in Paris in early 1958 during his doctoral research, which were even more impactful than his twelve months spent at the IAS. Finally, it was the topic of his Birkbeck Lectures, given in Cambridge in 1995 and published as *Peace in the Post-Reformation* (1998) unmentioned in his flyleaf biography, which in its study of the history of peace-making between people (not countries) as an activity of churches between the Reformation and the 18th

century, has continued, arguably, to have had more enduring influence than his works on the social history of religion down to the present day.

Early life: London, Cambridge and Carlisle (1933–56)

John Bossy was born in Edmonton, north London, on 30 April 1933 to parents he himself described as being of ‘decayed professional’ status. John’s father, Frederick (1891–1967) was the son of a GP and one of ten siblings. He was educated at home by a governess until his own father’s untimely death, at the age of fifty-two, forced Frederick to go out and earn a living as a clerk for a shipping company in the City of London, which he did until the interwar slump bankrupted his employers. After a brief, unsuccessful, spell as owner-manager of his own shop in Edmonton, which he had bought probably with money borrowed from one of his six sisters (two of whom were governesses to Catholic families), Frederick returned to the City where he worked as an accounts clerk. However, in his spare time, he had been studying at St Bride’s Institute in the City, where he was awarded a London University diploma in Literature in 1927. This enabled him to construct a parallel career as a teacher of evening classes in literature for London County Council, for which he even published a textbook. Frederick also began, but did not complete, a book about the boys’ weeklies he had read as a child.¹ John’s mother Kitty (1896–1964) was also interested in literature, and both she and Frederick regularly attended readings at the famous Poetry Bookshop in Bloomsbury, founded by Harold Monro, which operated just off Theobold’s Rd (1913–26). Her background was more colourful. Her own mother had been an actress who, when on tour, left her three children with relatives, one of whom ran a pub in Notting Hill Gate. Kitty was thence sent to a convent boarding school in Tottenham, where she met one of Frederick’s sisters and ultimately Frederick himself. By the outbreak of war Frederick and Kitty, with their by now three children, Marjorie (1925–2024), Michael (b. 1929), as well as John born four years later, had moved to Clapton, to a house near that of his unmarried sisters. Michael recalls the important role he believes was played by the Roman Catholic elementary schools of, successively, St Edmund’s, Edmonton and St Scholastica’s Clapton, in John’s upbringing.

John, just aged six, and his elder brother Michael were both evacuated to Hertfordshire in the first month of the war. More than six decades later, in a passage from his final, unfinished study of Henry Howard, John described the abrupt end of the latter’s ‘idyllic’

¹ Correspondence between Frederick Bossy and various publishers relating to securing permission to reproduce relevant material from these weeklies suggests that he had returned to this project with intention to publish his findings in his final years. This was kept by John in his personal papers which it is hoped will be accepted by the Borthwick Institute of Archives, University of York.

early childhood years spent at Kenninghall surrounded by family and a large household when Edward Seymour, Earl of Hertford and Sir William Paget Secretary of State to the dying Henry VIII had the property summarily seized, in the following terms: ‘they [the idyllic years] ended with a clap of thunder resembling the one which shook thousands of less fortunate English children out of their homes and families in September 1939 ...’² According to Michael’s recollections: ‘We stayed for a happy year with the local tractor driver and his wife – cheerfully trudging through the snow of those early war winters to school in a single room village hall.’³ However, when Michael moved up to secondary school, St Ignatius’ College, Stamford Hill, but which had been evacuated at the start of the war to Welwyn Garden City, John was transferred to another household, alone and pretty miserable, to the extent that he pressured his father to take him home. In a letter sent in the summer of 2026, Michael recalls one detail that still resonates across the years. After his father came to collect him, John realised he had left behind his favourite stamp album before recollecting: ‘But I wasn’t going back to collect it.’⁴ He was then just eight or nine and his sister Marjorie believes that the experience was traumatic enough to worsen the stammer from which he already suffered.⁵ However, once John moved on to secondary school, which was by then back in London, he flourished. In the recollection of his elder brother Michael: ‘John really enjoyed most of his time at school. [He was] good at his academic work, enjoying debating despite his fairly bad speech impediment ([which] he recovered from in his twenties), playing enthusiastic if not high-level cricket and rugby’.⁶ His slightly older school contemporary, Peter O’Brien, confirms this and remembers John as being ‘prodigiously clever’. Although he was in fact two years younger than O’Brien, he had so impressed his history teacher, Arnold Bex, that it was decided that both Peter and John should try for an Open Scholarship to Queen’s College, Cambridge together. This is O’Brien’s recollection, whose richness of detail merits full quotation:

So in the autumn term of 1949 John and I spent many a private study period talking history together. Even at that age John’s thinking was powerful and original. I remember for instance when we argued about who was the most influential figure in the French Revolution and I argued for the realism of Mirabeau or effectiveness of Robespierre, he swept them and others aside in favour of Danton – because he incarnated, embraced and gave voice to the communal spirit of the revolution.

² John Bossy, Howard typescript, part 1, p. 3. This manuscript is hopefully to be deposited in the Borthwick Institute of Archives, University of York.

³ Taken from Michael Bossy’s homily at John’s Funeral Mass: St Wilfrid’s York, 11 November 2015.

⁴ Letter from Michael Bossy SJ to the author, 5 August 2026.

⁵ Michael remarked in the homily how John also attributed to this childhood experience the severe depression from which he periodically suffered in later life.

⁶ Personal communication by letter dated 5 August 2026 in the possession of the author.

John was ever anti-systems or forms of regimentation [he regarded the school cadet force, one of the pride and joys of Fr Guy Brinkworth, the head, with total scorn]. I was a champion of Gladstone's record of reforms: John argued for Disraeli – not for his reforms, but for his part in the Young England movement.⁷

John was just sixteen at the time, so it is perhaps unsurprising that, notwithstanding his precociousness, he was unsuccessful that year. However, he won an Exhibition scholarship the following one (1950) and went up to Cambridge in October 1951. His explanation for his initial lack of success the first time around in contrast with his subsequent academic recognition deserves recollection both for its honesty and wry, playful wit. O'Brien again:

John himself told me ... that he got nothing in 1949 because his deep knowledge of Disraeli clogged up his exam paper so he answered only a couple of questions instead of three, and that he got his exhibition the following year because he wrote a brilliant essay on 'Red Indians'. That probably says more about his great sense of humour than how it actually happened.⁸

John's college director of studies at Queen's during his first year was R.G.D. 'Robin' Laffan (1887–1972), a Roman Catholic convert who was in his penultimate year before he retired in 1953. Laffan had been an Anglican army chaplain in the First World War attached to the Serbian army (1916–18), and had written a well-regarded book about the history of Serbia (1918).⁹ However, the academic whom Laffan assigned to John as supervisor was the Austrian-Jewish medievalist, Walter Ullmann (1910–83), to whom John attributed his conversion from a Catholic propagandist into an historian.¹⁰ Laffan had known Ullmann since the latter arrived as a refugee in 1939 from Nazi persecution, helping him get his first job (as a school master) until, after the war, Ullmann began his academic year in Leeds before moving to Cambridge, just two years before John himself, in 1949. Ullmann had been less than impressed by an over-enthusiastic and uncritical essay that John had written in his first term on Pope Gregory VII's 11th-century reforms. The cure Ullmann prescribed, as John recalled, was to require him to read a set of texts on Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) in Latin and German over the Christmas vacation. 'This ... was the event that converted him from propagandist to serious historian, albeit one who still wanted to write history with style.'¹¹ Perhaps not unrelated to this experi-

⁷ Personal communication via email to Eamon Duffy.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ T.G. Otte, "'The Light of History': scholarship and officialdom in the First World War', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 30:2 (2019), 253–87 at 282 n. 76.

¹⁰ For the detail about Laffan's role in assisting Ullmann on his arrival in Britain, see John A. Watt, 'Walter Ullmann, 1910–1983', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 74 (1988), 483–509 at 485.

¹¹ Peter Jupp, 'John Bossy: a personal appreciation', in Simon Ditchfield (ed.), *Christianity and Community in the West: essays for John Bossy* (Ashgate, 2001), pp. 294–307 at p. 297. Cf. 'Walter Ullmann (according

ence, John recalls that he was more influenced by lectures than by supervisions, though I suspect that with his stutter he would have been uncomfortably self-conscious at having to respond to tutors' probing questions in one-to-one supervisions. Amongst the lecturers he heard, John singled out for praise the historian of medieval monasticism and thought, M. David Knowles (1896–1974), who was then Professor of Medieval History (and appointed Regius Professor the year John graduated); Herbert Butterfield (1900–1979), author, *inter alia*, of the historiographical classic *Whig Interpretation of History* (1931); and Peter Laslett (1915–2001), sometime Butterfield's protégé, whose career at that time was devoted not to the historical demography for which he later became famous, but to the history of political thought (specifically the work of Filmer and Locke). I believe it is significant for John's subsequent development as an historian that all three of these historians were not only practitioners, albeit in their distinctive ways, of the history of ideas, but also noted for their engaging and distinctive styles as lecturers and public speakers.

After these busy three years at university, at the end of which John graduated with a double first (i.e. a first in both parts I and II of his degree), he found himself in a very different environment for the next two (1954–56). These were spent doing national service as a clerk in the Royal Armoured Corps Training camp in Carlisle with the rank of Trooper in the 11th Hussars. It was at about this time that John tried his hand at writing a novel, but found he could not invent stories so gave up. This is not a period in his life which John spoke about willingly, if at all, and on the very rare occasions when he did so, it was to remark on the boredom and futility (bordering on cruelty) of the regime he had to live under. However, he did take advantage of this period of enforced routine and tedium to learn to type and to drive, as well as to take a correspondence course in Italian (among modern languages, John already had a confident grasp of French, as well as a basic reading knowledge of German). According to Peter Jupp, John was 'gripped' by the varied speech patterns of fellow conscripts who came from all different social classes from all parts of Britain and Northern Ireland.¹²

to John) was the person who made him an historian, helping him to overcome his romantic attachment to Belloc and perhaps Cobbett, which he had acquired at school.' Michael Bossy, in a letter to the author, 5 August 2026. In the spring term of 1979 when John had just arrived at York, I took the second-year course with him *Italy from Machiavelli to Galileo*, and I distinctly remember him scrawling in the margins to one of my essays in which I had quoted Carlyle and Macaulay: 'Do we need this?' (Underlining is in the original).

¹² Jupp, 'John Bossy: a personal appreciation', p. 297.

The postgraduate years: Cambridge and Paris (1956–62)

Although after the end of this period of national service, ‘there was a period of dithering about what to do next’, it was not prolonged and John returned to Cambridge (and Queen’s College) to begin doctoral research later the same year (1956).¹³ When casting around for a topic, he followed the advice of the Jesuit historians, Leo Hicks (1888–1968) and Basil Fitzgibbon (1896–1980), who steered John away from his first choice, the career of Robert Persons (1546–1610) founder of the Jesuit English Mission, towards the topic of the Elizabethan Catholics and France.¹⁴ As supervisor, he was allocated H. Outram Evennett (1901–64), fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. Evennett’s combination of specific knowledge about French Catholicism in the later 16th century, plus his wider interest in the European Counter-Reformation, made him the obvious choice.¹⁵ He had not only written a well-received biography of the Cardinal Charles of Lorraine (1524–74), who led the French delegation of bishops to the crucial, final period of the Council of Trent (1562–63), but also delivered the Birkbeck Lectures on ‘The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation’, in 1951, which were finally published, posthumously, and with a postscript by his former student, in 1968.¹⁶

In the light of his subsequent reputation as a social historian of religion, who played a leading role in the adoption of sociological and anthropological theory, John’s doctoral dissertation might come as a surprise. This is owing to its strongly political and prosopographical approach, rooted in such traditional historical sources as State Papers Domestic and Foreign combined with diplomatic correspondence and memoirs. At its core, John provided the reader with a minutely documented account of the English Catholic émigrés who took refuge across the channel between c. 1570 and the accession of James I in 1603. In contrast to the largely conformist English Catholic community, which was to be the subject of John’s first widely read publication,¹⁷ that in exile was, in its first phase, closely entangled with radical politics and religious polemic of the Guise-led Catholic League, before its focus shifted to the so-called Appellants

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fitzgibbon and Hicks are both mentioned in the ‘Acknowledgements – Preliminary Notes’ to Bossy, ‘Elizabethan Catholicism’, p. iii.

¹⁵ The degree to which Evennett was plugged into mainland European scholarship may be gauged by the fact that he was in correspondence with Hubert Jedin (1900–1985), author of the classic history of the Council of Trent (1951–75). Evennett had evidently assisted Jedin in finding the English translator for the first two volumes: the Benedictine Ernest Graf. John had in his possession a number of postcards and letters from Jedin to Evennett sent between 1950 and 1954, which are now deposited in Trinity College Cambridge library.

¹⁶ *The Cardinal of Lorraine and the Council of Trent: a study in the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1930); *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (Cambridge University Press, 1968).

¹⁷ ‘The Character of English Catholicism’, *Past & Present*, 21 (1962), 39–59.

(or Archpriest) controversy, which became an echo chamber for Franco-Spanish tensions. John was later to nuance his approach here considerably in what remains his longest and most heavily footnoted academic article.¹⁸ Its closing paragraphs provide a bravura display of John's sensitivity to language (as both historical subject matter as well as the historian's tool) – in this case the mutual linguistic incomprehension between the French and English sides of the controversy – which he believed allowed English Catholicism, at a most delicate period in the very first years of the new century, to develop largely undisturbed by foreign interference. Or as he put it in particularly well-crafted final lines of the article:

Sixty or seventy years of mutual incomprehension could not be abolished in a moment. Villeroi [Henri IV's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs] did not do anything clever about the English Catholics; but in the end, by sheer negativity, he provided a time of slack water in which essential vegetation could grow. The inconclusive eddyings here charted reveal the point at which a tide turns.¹⁹

In a letter dated 20 April 2002, which John sent to thank me for editing his *festschrift*, commenting on certain details of my introduction, he wrote:

I thought you had hit a lot of nails on the head, and was very pleased by your picking up of 'inconclusive eddyings'. Two things to say about 'inconclusive eddyings': (1) it was the crunch of what is probably the most serious contribution I have made to the increase of knowledge, no, not serious, substantial; the part of my [doctoral] thesis which had a very solid archival basis underneath it – given life and health I should like to put it into a book; (2) the last two lines of the article, inclusive the phrase you cite, are in blank verse, which is a fault in prose, but has a certain cachet as something that is unlikely to be replicated by other contributions to *Recusant History*, *P&P*, or the *EHR*.²⁰

As already mentioned, in his dissertation John made extensive use not only of the Public Record Office, State Papers Domestic and Foreign (mainly France), but also of diplomatic correspondence held in manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris and the Vatican library (where the records of the papal nuncios to the French court are held). In order to follow the careers of émigrés who, aided by Guise patronage, took up positions in the provincial French church, John also consulted the cathedral chapter archives at Reims and Rouen. Additional manuscript material was forthcoming from the Jesuit archives in Rome as well as from the English college in Valladolid (the latter made available to him in a copy provided by the Jesuit archivist of the British Province, Basil Fitzgibbon). Amongst his printed primary sources John made extensive use of memoirs,

¹⁸ 'Henry IV, the Appellants and the Jesuits', *Recusant History*, 8 (1965), 80–122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁰ To be deposited with the Bossy papers.

particularly those printed by the Catholic Record Society and of letter collections of leading French figures published mainly in the 19th century. He was not to return to such sources until he came to research and write *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy affair* (1991), and its pendant, *Under the Mole Hill*, of a decade later, as well as his final, incomplete and unpublished study of Henry Howard. The destination of the English Catholic exiles was initially directed towards the Spanish Netherlands, but it came to be diverted in the later 1570s to France, which remained the centre until about 1590.²¹ Underlying his approach was the belief that it was only by studying this expat Catholic diaspora that one could discover ‘the attitudes theoretical and practical, of the Elizabethan Catholics as a whole’.²² By adopting such a granular approach, John was able to show that the existence of a community and ideology of ‘International Catholicism, a solid body of which the English Catholics [in France] form a cell’ as posited by J.E. Neale, amongst others, was an unhelpful projection that perhaps owed more to the binary politics of Cold War Europe than its late-16th century predecessor.²³

However, it would be misleading to overemphasise the methodologically traditional nature of John’s doctoral dissertation. As he recounted in his conversation with Peter Jupp (22 August 1998), in the Spring of 1958 he went to Paris for five months, funded by a grant from the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique, and ‘got into things French of all sorts’.²⁴ These included not only the liberal-leftist Catholic journal *L’Esprit*, but also the work of the religious sociologist, Gabriel Le Bras (1891–1970), and that of the historical journal *Annales*.²⁵ On John’s own admission this last encounter, in particular, caused him to rethink the structure of his doctoral dissertation by placing social matters in the middle and politics at the end.²⁶ On his return to London, according to Jupp’s account, John read his way into Marxism and out of Catholicism (at least in a formal sense). He therefore became, together with his slightly younger contemporary (and fellow alumnus of St Ignatius College, Stamford Hill), Peter Burke FBA (b. 1937), one of the very first British historians to engage with the *Annaliste* approach to history, since the latter had organised a seminar in Oxford in c. 1961 on the subject that was

²¹ Bossy, ‘Elizabethan Catholicism: the link with France’, p. 37.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 341. In note 1 of that page John lists Neale’s then recently published *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1584–1601* (1957). John specifically cites Neale’s reference (p. 13) to: ‘The Cold War of Catholicism against Protestantism’.

²⁴ Jupp, ‘John Bossy: a personal appreciation’, p. 298.

²⁵ Perhaps Le Bras’ most influential work: *Études de sociologie religieuses* (Paris: PUF, 1955–56) had only been recently published when John arrived in Paris, and Le Bras remained a director of research at the École pratique des hautes études until 1962.

²⁶ So that section II or part 2 of the dissertation, which included such sub-sections as: ‘personnel and social orientation’ and ‘Ideology’ now preceded section III – ‘France and the politics of Elizabethan Catholicism’. Although the latter remained the longest section of the dissertation (pp. 202–337).

attended, *inter alia*, by Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914–2003), then Regius Professor in History, and Lawrence Stone (1919–99). The first published fruits of John's interest in this historical approach appeared in 1964, in a short article on the missionary 'enterprise of England' for the *Historical Journal*. This sketched out how a chapter of a Braudellian history of early modern Catholicism might look if viewed in terms of an organisation: 'chiefly occupied, like other human enterprises, in getting people and objects from one point to another with the lines and methods of communication available'.²⁷

His university career: London, Belfast and York (1962–2000)

With the end of John's JRF at Queen's Cambridge in 1962, he needed to find a job. In the autumn of that year he moved back to London, taking up a lectureship in history at Goldsmith's College, University of London, where he stayed for just four years before moving to Queen's University Belfast in 1966 (where he was to remain, with a brief interlude spent at the IAS in Princeton, until 1978). However, before he left London he submitted for publication an article, 'Four Catholic congregations in Rural Northumberland, 1750–1850', which hinted at the direction his research on the English Catholic community was taking: towards social history and away from international politics.²⁸ However, at the same time as building upon his work on the English Catholic Community, which was to be published eventually in 1975, John was getting his eye in for an altogether wider project: nothing less than a rewriting of the history of Christianity in the West (1400–1700), which was to come out ten years after that (in 1985).²⁹ What pushed him on this broader path of historical investigation was an act of *pietas* towards his erstwhile doctoral supervisor, H. Outram Evennett, whose 1951 Birkbeck Lectures on the Counter-Reformation, John prepared for publication as *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (1968, though his introduction bears the date and place '1966 Belfast').³⁰ According to his own account, John left Evennett's text unchanged, only adding a prefatory, contextual paragraph and footnotes to the main text. However, he did write *ex novo* a postscript which aimed 'to convey some idea of what has been going on in the study of the Counter-Reformation in the fifteen years since Evennett wrote, and to

²⁷ Bossy, 'Rome and the Elizabethan Catholics: a question of geography', *Historical Journal*, 7 (1964), 135–49. In the letter of 20 April 2002 cited above, John mentioned how this essay was to have been followed up with one on the finances of the English mission, but that this direction of his research stopped when he moved from Cambridge to London in 1962.

²⁸ *Recusant History*, 9 (1967), 88–119. This was followed by: 'More Northumbrian Congregations', *Recusant History*, 10 (1969), 11–29.

²⁹ *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford University Press, 1985; Italian translation, Einaudi, 1990).

³⁰ H. Outram Evennett, *The Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*, edited with a postscript by John Bossy (Cambridge University Press, 1968)). The postscript is dated Belfast 1966.

discuss some aspects of its history on which he had comparatively little to say'.³¹ Although John apologised at the start for his Anglocentric bias, in fact he offered a brilliant conspectus of mainland European scholarship in French, Italian, Dutch and German that still bears consulting over a half a century later. On the evidence of this essay alone, with its mastery of elegantly compressed synthesis, it is clear that John had put his experience as an undergraduate lecturer of survey courses at Goldsmiths to good use. In an appreciative review by Dermot Fenlon, which devotes as much attention to John's postscript as to Evennett's lectures, the reviewer notes that this more recent literature confirmed the latter's account of the 'modernisation in the Church' for the period 1550–1600 but that subsequently the Counter-Reformation ran out of steam.³² The effect of this, according to Fenlon, was 'to redress the accidental imbalance created by Evennett's concern with the more positive aspects of the Counter-Reformation'.³³ In light of the central, animating spirit of *Christianity in the West*, with which readers of this memoir will likely be most familiar, it is interesting that Fenlon singled out for comment John's argument, already manifest, for the ultimate failure of the Catholic Reformation. In Fenlon's essentially accurate reading, there existed for John an irreconcilable tension between the agenda of the socially rigid, reformation programme of the bishops on the one hand, and the flexible mission mentality of the Jesuits on the other. This deadlock, which potentially might have been resolved by the papacy (but wasn't), remained in place: 'Hence Catholicism failed to adjust to the shift in European civilisation from a Mediterranean to an Atlantic base.'³⁴ Here is a characteristically Bossyesque deduction that impresses with its certainty, even as it irons out complexity. We shall encounter several, further examples of John's rhetorical argumentation.

One need look no further than John's *English Catholic Community* (1975) to see how the decade or so John spent at Belfast undeniably impacted on his work. From the outset John was careful to clarify his key terms, beginning with 'Community', which he defined in terms of: 'a body of people ... with its own internal structure and way of life'.³⁵ He then went on to emphasise how he was concerned with the 'social whole' of this body: 'in relation to itself, with its internal constitution [including the distribution of power within it] and the internal logic of its history': a 'whole' which took in the community in all its members, 'with the laity in the first place and the clergy in the second'.³⁶ Such a community did not exist in isolation, and John broke decisively with historiographical tradition here when he not only stressed the discontinuities between pre- and post-Refor-

³¹ Evennett, *Spirit*, p. 126.

³² *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), 568–70.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 569.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

³⁵ *English Catholic Community*, p. 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

mation Roman Catholicism, but also by seeking to understand English Catholics not as a single minority in binary relationships with an undifferentiated Protestant majority, but instead as simply one nonconformist religious community amongst several, who included Quakers, Unitarians and Methodists.³⁷ All of this was carried out by John in order to understand ‘the religious and social experience of the average Catholic’.³⁸

To realise this aim, John drew particular inspiration not only from such *Annaliste* historians as Philippe Ariès (1914–84) and Jean-Louis Flandrin (1931–2001), but also from the religious sociology practised by Gabriel Le Bras, who proposed to study the structure and life of organised groups for which the sacred was their beginning and end.³⁹ For John, in a paper that was presented at a *Past & Present* conference on Popular Religion (7 July 1966), just before he left London for Belfast, Le Bras offered the only way to get at the reception of the Council of Trent at the popular level.⁴⁰ In his chapter (6) ‘Separation: Types of Religious behaviour’, John drew on the work of Mary Douglas on pollution and purity and on that of Arnold Van Gennep on rites of passage to argue how emphasis on ritual observance – most visibly fasting – provided the most visible means by which members of the English Catholic Community could affirm their identity.⁴¹ However, he had anticipated such an approach as early as 1967 in an article already mentioned, which perhaps represents his most literal engagement with interpretations of the insights and methods of social anthropology and the sociology of religion: ‘Four Catholic congregations in Rural Northumbria, 1750–1850’.⁴²

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 296, 391–401.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁹ Gabriel Le Bras, ‘Sociologie religieuse et sciences des religions’, *Archives de sociologie des religions*, 1 (1956), 3–17. John was undoubtedly encouraged by the contemporaneous developments in French historiography: notably *Le Catholicisme entre Luther et Voltaire* (1971) by Jean Delumeau (1923–2020), which John had very favourably reviewed (*English Historical Review*, 87 (1972), 864–5) and to which he wrote the preface for the English translation by Jeremy Moiser (Burnes & Oates, 1977). It was from Delumeau, for example, that John had borrowed the concept of ‘average Christian’ (*Chrétien quelconque*).

⁴⁰ ‘This paper is an attempt to enumerate the problems involved in the reception of Tridentine Catholicism at the popular level. The extremely clerical character of most Catholic historiography of this period makes this a rather difficult task; that it is at all possible is mainly due to the work of Gabriel Le Bras and his school of *sociologie religieuse*, and I have tried to assemble what seems to me to be, in this field, its main results.’ These are the opening lines of John’s paper ‘Regimentation and Initiative in the popular Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation’. I consulted it in a bound, typescript copy of seven of the papers that were presented on that day, which is also hopefully to be deposited with the Bossy papers at the Borthwick. Other contributions were by Gordon Leff, Margaret Aston, Patrick Collinson, Brian Harrison, John Kent and Susan Budd.

⁴¹ *English Catholic Community*, pp. 108–48. ‘Gabriel le Bras has characterised some modern types of Catholic life as ‘as seasonal conformity’; English Catholicism, so far as the laity was concerned, had its origins in a seasonal nonconformity. (p. 121)’

⁴² See above n. 28. This was replete with section headings such as: ‘Topography and Social Character’ and ‘Practice and Behaviour’ as well as including statistics measuring marriage and baptismal practice.

It should therefore cause little surprise that critical reactions to the *English Catholic Community*, whilst fully acknowledging its substantive contribution to our understanding of Catholic religious practices in their social and geographical dimensions, were even more struck by the book's methodological and historiographical innovations. With the benefit of half a century of hindsight, it might be said that both reactions were connected. John self-consciously moved beyond the 'martyrological' school of interpretation, with its stress on Catholic-Protestant difference and the narrative of gradual decline and fall until rescued (unmeritedly according to John) by a blood transfusion of Irish immigration combined with the prestige of Oxford Movement converts in the 19th century, to offer an internalist account of the Roman Catholic community. In this way, the community could better be seen in its own right and on its own terms, rather than simply as a minority misunderstood and condescended to by a majority. Such an approach was undoubtedly impacted by the fact that John was writing the book in Belfast during the early years of the sectarian conflict, better known as 'The Troubles'. As Peter Jupp recounts from his interview with John in 1998:

Initially his sympathies were strongly with the Catholics and he went on at least one civil rights march. However, the gradual hijacking of what was initially an American and continentally inspired Civil Rights movement by militant Republicans ... persuaded him to look more favourably upon Unionism. In due course he took up the cause of the Unionists as a misunderstood and beleaguered 'community' being subjected to the same sort of intolerance that they were supposed to have visited upon nationalists.⁴³

Not long after he had moved from Belfast to York, John wrote a review article on patterns of violence in Ireland in which he castigated those who patronised the inhabitants of Ulster with 'quasi historical explanations which were trivial because they did not depend on or encourage exact acquaintance with particular circumstances', and proposed instead an 'internalist' explanatory model which took into account the presence of 'a structural tradition of feud and violence in the country which is independent of the presence of protestants and would survive their departure'.⁴⁴

However, this internalist focus also came under criticism. For example, Christopher Haigh accused John of relying overmuch on gentry sources to the extent that he had given us what was effectively 'a social history of the catholic gentry', with the result that 'Since [Bossy] has isolated gentry dominance as the distinguishing mark of the community he studies, it is not surprising that he finds the role of the gentry central to

⁴³ Jupp, 'John Bossy: a personal appreciation', p. 301.

⁴⁴ Bossy, 'Patterns of Violence: Ireland and History: a review of A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: aspects of Ulster, 1609–1969* (1977)', *Encounter*, 52:5 (1979), 67–72, quotations at 69 and 70–71.

the emergence of that community.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, the chronological unevenness of the book's evidential basis came in for criticism, with its emphasis on the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods reflecting John's fuller knowledge of this period. However, the same reviewer, John Miller, also acknowledged there was a trade-off, since the book's 'main purpose is to advance hypotheses to be tested by further detailed research ... In its ideas and methodology, it is of profound significance not only for Catholic historians but for all those interested in the history of religion in England.'⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Christopher Haigh, in his review for the *Historical Journal* cited above, drew a distinction between the book's conceptual fertility and its scholarly achievement, arguing that the former outweighed the latter. W.R. Ward was similarly impressed by John's overall achievement, recognising how the author 'does better than anyone has done for Anglicanism or Dissent to suggest how it "felt" to belong to his community', and how 'Writing colloquially as one reporting a continuing conversation, Bossy does not so much challenge dissent as invite further conversation ...'⁴⁷ The protracted gestation of *English Catholic Community* meant that it appeared after the publication of several articles which had Western Europe as their geographical focus and the social practices of its Roman Catholic inhabitants as their thematic focus.⁴⁸ These were followed by similarly wide-ranging studies of the Mass and of Godparenthood.⁴⁹ But this is to get ahead of our chronological narrative.

John's deep affection for Belfast and the colleagues he made there is manifested not only in Peter Jupp's account in his contribution to the *festschrift* for John.⁵⁰ There were also lasting friendships with such colleagues as Alexander 'Sandy' Grant and Ian and Judith Green. He was also, according to his brother Michael, friendly with the political

⁴⁵ Christopher Haigh, 'The Fall of a Church or the Rise of a Sect: Post-Reformation Catholicism in England', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1978), 181–6, quotations at 181 and 183.

⁴⁶ John Miller in the *English Historical Review*, 92 (1977), 134–7, quotation at 136–7.

⁴⁷ W.R. Ward, review in *Journal of Modern History*, 50 (1978), 506–8.

⁴⁸ 'The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe', *Past & Present*, 47 (1970), 51–70; 'Blood and Baptism: Kinship, Community and Christianity in Western Europe', *Studies in Church History*, 10, (1973), 129–43; and 'The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 25 (1975), 21–38. The first of these was also the first of John's articles to be translated into a foreign language as: 'Controriforma e Popolo dell'Europa cattolica' in Mario Rosa (ed.), *Le origini dell'Europa moderna* (Donato, 1977), pp. 231–308 and was then reprinted in David M. Luebke (ed.), *The Counter Reformation: the essential readings* (Blackwell, 1999), pp. 85–104.

⁴⁹ 'Padrine e madrine: un'istituzione sociale del cristianesimo popolare in occidente', *Quaderni storici*, 41 (1979), 140–9, and 'Essai de sociographie de la messe, 1200–1700', *Annales: E.S.C.*, 36 (1981), 44–70. These were reprinted as, respectively: 'Godparenthood: the fortunes of a social institution in early modern Europe, 1500–1800', in Kasper von Greyerz (ed.), *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe 1500–1800* (HarperCollins, 1984), pp. 194–201; and 'The Mass as a Social Institution 1200–1700', *Past & Present*, 100 (1983), 29–61.

⁵⁰ Cited above in n. 11 and elsewhere.

scientist John Whyte (1928–90) who was then completing a history of the Roman Catholic church in an independent Ireland. While in N. Ireland John befriended too the independent scholar of English iconoclasm, Margaret Aston FBA (1932–2014), whose husband was at the Northern Ireland Office from 1974 to 1985. She later became an Honorary Research fellow at Queens (1984–85) after John had left N. Ireland (1984–85), though they continued to be friends after he had moved to York.⁵¹ The reasons why John did decide to leave were, however, not perhaps the obvious ones. Sandy Grant recalls that, although teaching in Belfast at the height of the Troubles was hardly a ‘normal academic experience’ and John was, on one occasion, called to court to testify as character witness when one of his tutees was arrested for holding up a Post Office on behalf of the Official IRA (and subsequently sentenced to four years), he at least declared himself to be unfazed by such challenges.⁵² Instead he focused on teaching his students his first love: debate and how to see things from both sides; a skill which was in short supply in N. Ireland in the 1970s. Grant also remembers:

We used to do joint revision seminars and I have sharp memories of John chiding me during one session, for stating that a student’s point was wrong: ‘You must never tell a student that they are wrong’, he insisted, and then went on to take the particular statement and reflect on it in a way that turned it round by some 170 degrees and yet, by not going to the whole 180 (so to speak) left the student feeling that what she said *had* been valuable and was still valid. That, I think, is one of the most important lessons that I have learned during my entire academic career (But John didn’t treat *colleagues* like that – he could certainly disagree fundamentally with them!)

I thus believe that there is a simpler reason for John’s move from Queens: academic ambition. This is not a word often invoked when talking about him, and he was certainly no careerist willing to sacrifice his beliefs and integrity on the altar of academic success. However, I do believe he knew his worth, and with a clutch of excellent articles under his belt, the imminent publication of *English Catholic Community*, and now success at securing a prestigious research fellowship at Princeton’s Institute of Advanced Study (IAS), I think he reckoned it was worth a shot at applying for a chair. We also need to

⁵¹ Susan Brigden, ‘Margaret Aston, 1932–2014’, *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 18 (2019), 325–36 at 331. John was later to contribute to her *festschrift*: ‘The devotional compositions of Lord Henry Howard, 1584–1596’, in Linda Clark, Maureen Jurkowski & Colin Richmond (eds), *Image, Text and Church, 1380–1600: essays for Margaret Aston* (PIMS, 2009), pp. 239–56.

⁵² Email to Eamon Duffy from Sandy Grant, November 2015. ‘He was entirely sanguine about the dangers and crises of the Troubles. He denied the effects on the city of emergencies and bombings, and was irritated when friends anxiously sympathised. “Fussing” he called it.’ Taken from the eulogy given at John’s funeral by his old friend Mary Flannery, text kindly supplied by Michael Bossy. It should perhaps be remembered that John lived out the last few years of the war back in North London, and so would have experienced the VI and V2 raids, as well as be familiar with the ruined landscape of central London which was not built over until the 1970s.

remember that at this time – indeed until the early Noughties – personal chairs were rare and the main way of being promoted to professorial level was to apply for a post advertised at that rank. I don't know whether John applied anywhere else before York, but the prospect of a chair that had been held by Gerald Aylmer FBA (1926–2000), who had been founder professor of a department which was at the time one of the strongest and largest outside London and Oxbridge, must have been an attractive one.⁵³ There was also York's relative proximity to London where John had old friends.

John's successful application to the IAS in Princeton, where he spent the academic year 1976–77, suggests he was ready to submit his developing ideas for public scrutiny before some of the leading figures in the fields of anthropology and social history on the international stage. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) had recently moved to the IAS from Chicago (1970) and just published his collection of essays: *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).⁵⁴ Nearby, at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical study at Princeton University, which had been founded in 1968, John would also have had the opportunity to renew his acquaintance with Lawrence Stone, who was about to publish *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977).⁵⁵ This involved attendance at the weekly, Friday morning seminars, which were (in)famous for their gladiatorial atmosphere and presided over by Stone, then in his imperial pomp, who was director of the Center 1968–90. A small notebook, with pages laid out clearly for the keeping of accounts, to which John had given the simple title on the inside of the front cover 'List of Writings', enables us to keep track of the papers he gave while he was in the USA.⁵⁶ As might be expected from the son of an accounts clerk, albeit one with literary ambitions, the notebook meticulously listed each one, often with both the date he finished writing and delivered each paper, book, article and review, followed by the date of its publication together, occasionally, with some brief comments. We can see from this notebook that he gave the paper 'The Mass as a Social Ritual in pre-Reformation Christianity' first at the Social Science seminar at the IAS on 9 March 1977, but also repeated it at several other universities, including Berkeley (where he would have likely met Natalie Z. Davis), Stanford, Montreal, Stonybrook and Baltimore (Johns Hopkins?).⁵⁷ In addition, he gave a paper 'On the

⁵³ It certainly attracted a strong field. John beat into second place Peter Burke.

⁵⁴ The anthology he edited *Myth, Symbol, Culture*, followed with the ethnographic monograph *Kinship in Bali* published the following year.

⁵⁵ In his letter to me of April 2002 already cited, John wrote: 'I don't think that I was moved by Lawrence Stone on the family, more by Ariès and Flandrin and maybe by Laslett: later, I did a review of Stone on Divorce, which he thought was offensive and wouldn't speak to me again.'

⁵⁶ This covered the years 1973–2015 and was found in John Bossy's papers in August 2026. The intention is to deposit it, together with his selected papers, in the Borthwick Institute of Archives.

⁵⁷ This paper was later to be revised for publication first in *Annales E.S.C* in 1981 and then in English translation in *Past & Present* (1983).

Social History of Godparents' first in Pittsburgh in December 1976, which he later repeated at the Davis Center the following April.⁵⁸

I used to wonder at how John managed to write what was essentially 'local history' – with its focus on the rural communities of English Catholicism, mostly located in the North and West – in tandem with what was nothing less than a social history of Christianity as experienced by 'the average soul' in Western Europe over a period of unprecedented religious change. However, re-reading his work for this memoir, I have come to the conclusion that the answer is to be found in the fact that they have a common root in John's abiding interest in *orthopraxy* – religion as behaviour – rather than with *orthodoxy* – religion as a set of beliefs. Accordingly, there could be no better preparation for John's extended wide-ranging 'essay', *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (1985), than what remains, to this day, his only published research monograph in the conventional sense of the term (even as its substance is anything but ordinary): *The English Catholic Community 1570–1850* (1975).

When (re)-reading *English Catholic Community*, it is worth noting that important insight into John's abiding concerns and convictions can be gleaned from reading his numerous book reviews, which were composed over more than four decades (the mid-1960s to the early 2010s). In his consideration of Keith Thomas's classic *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971), for example, John chided the author 'for not having taken to heart more than he has done' Lucien Febvre's demonstration, in *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVI^e siècle* (1942), how 'Christianity was the only totalizing force in the popular experience of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.⁵⁹ Almost two decades later, reflection upon Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: men, women and sexual renunciation in early Christianity* (1988) provoked John into distilling his considerable work on the social history of the sacraments to write: 'human relations are one of the main things Christianity is about and any Christian notion of the world will include a notion about the state of human relations in it.'⁶⁰ Many of these reviews were commissioned not by academic journals but by such literary reviews as *Encounter*, *The New Statesman*, *Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books*.⁶¹ For John, their writing was clearly as integral to the craft of being an historian who never stopped reflecting on his practice and priorities, as were the composition of his own articles and books. Additional evidence for this may be found in the already mentioned notebook

⁵⁸ This was first published in Italian in 1979.

⁵⁹ Bossy, 'Early Modern Magic', *History*, 57 (1972), 399–403, quotations at 401.

⁶⁰ Bossy, 'Vile Bodies', *Past & Present*, 124 (1989), 180–7, quotation at 185.

⁶¹ There were, however, several review articles which he wrote for *Past & Present*. In lieu of a comprehensive list of all his reviews, I refer the interested reader to Ken Farnhill, 'Select Bibliography of the writings of John Bossy', in Ditchfield, *Christianity and Community in the West*, pp. 308–16. This includes reference to many of his most significant reviews (incl. those for *Past & Present*).

‘List of Writings’. The first entry, dated 9 December 1973, appropriately enough, was a book review of William Bangert’s history of the Jesuits, for the *Catholic Historical Review*.⁶²

Once he had settled into life in York, John could take advantage of a less traditional curriculum design than he had been familiar with, where, for example, lectures could be theme-specific rather than having to be tied to a particular chronologically determined, comprehensive survey course. His first-year lectures on the history of Christianity, for instance, were used to try out his ideas about the history of the sacraments. They were eagerly attended also by intellectually curious members of academic staff, who undoubtedly found John’s idiosyncratic lecture style – both in delivery (since he never completely eliminated the disfluency that arose out of his childhood and adolescent stutter) and content (one not infrequently felt oneself to be eavesdropping on his private thought process: ever self-questioning and sinuous) – easier to follow than most of the students. The latter therefore voted with their feet, so that by the end of the series there were often more staff than undergraduates in the audience. For his second-year themed seminar on historiography, John chose the Sociology of Religion, which he co-taught to the delight of both students and staff and which directly led to the composition of two important articles.⁶³ In the recollection of his long-time colleague Peter Biller, these lectures and seminars were the testing grounds for the ideas which ultimately combined to create John’s masterpiece, *Christianity in the West*.⁶⁴ It was in his early years at York that he continued to develop his interests in anthropological approaches to the past, co-organising the *Past & Present* summer conference of 1980 on Law and Human relations, where he involved, *inter alia*, two other York colleagues; namely, the early medievalist Edward James, and the early modernist historian of crime James Sharpe (1946–2024).⁶⁵ In his postscript to the essay collection that arose out of this conference he wrote:

What I had in mind when proposing the topic for a conference was the idea of a social history which would be a history of actual people: a feeling that the record of law and especially of litigation was a good place to find out something about them; some

⁶² The review is to be found in the *Catholic Historical Review*, 60 (1974), 448–9. The last item was the ‘Afterword’ in James Kelly & Susan Royal (eds), *Early Modern English Catholicism: identity, memory and counter-Reformation* (Brill, 2017), pp. 246–54.

⁶³ These were John’s inaugural lecture at York mentioned above, which became ‘Some elementary forms of Durkheim’, and Peter Biller, ‘Words and the Medieval notion of “Religion”’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 36 (1985), 351–69.

⁶⁴ In the second half of the 1980s John replaced his second-year seminar on Sociology of Religion and History to one dedicated to History and Narration, which he continued to teach until he retired, and which fed directly into his thinking when writing *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* and *Under the Molehill*.

⁶⁵ John Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: law and human relations in the West* (Cambridge University Press, 1983).

experience in the history of the social institutions of Christianity considered as peace-making rituals, and a wish to pursue the subject of arbitration and peace-making as an important matter in itself; and an interest in the theory of marriage represented in *Romeo and Juliet*.⁶⁶

As both a former student and colleague, I can confirm from personal experience that the seminar (and tutorial) rather than the lecture brought out John's pedagogical strengths. Above all, he was a great listener who believed in complete equality and mutual respect between teacher and student. He paid as much considered attention to the ideas of a rookie first-year undergraduate as he did to a Fellow of the British Academy (and was, as Sandy Grant indicated, much more indulgent to the former). As an inveterate smoker until he was well into his seventies (after which he continued to draw hungrily on his nicotine puffer until he was admitted to hospital just weeks before his death), John would sometimes fiddle with his cigarette packet (for many years John Player Special with its distinctive black and gold livery), pull one out and then light up (unfailing with a Swan Vesta match), taking a deep drag before he commenced his careful response to a student paper or intervention. Often he would begin with a single word – 'OK' – which might be spoken with a melismatic, gently rising tone, thus preparing those present for qualifications to come. These were always delivered in a deliberate and considered manner even when, as not infrequently occurred, they were interspersed with a chuckle or laugh as something occurred to John as he continued to craft his response; thinking as he went along.⁶⁷ Students soon learned to bide their time – and as smoking remained permitted in teaching rooms, in my recollection, at least until John retired in 2000 – not a few of them would themselves also light up, thereby contributing to a fug of more relaxed sociability that today seems scarcely credible. Although he never acted as a formal doctoral supervisor, John was a most generous reader of colleagues' and others' work (as I can personally testify). He also acted as a conscientious external PhD examiner on numerous occasions, beginning with Eamon Duffy in 1972. Indeed, the programme for John's *festschrift* seminar, held at the King's Manor, Exhibition Square, York (27 October 2001), consisted entirely of contributions from a selection of his former doctoral examinees.⁶⁸ Several colleagues reading drafts of this memoir have been surprised to discover that John never did have doctoral students. I was once told that John felt uncomfortable with the idea of feeling obliged to try and find them academic jobs, but given the number of letters of reference he found himself writing anyway, I don't think it can have been this. Instead, one needs to remember that in the 1970s, 1980s and even early 1990s

⁶⁶ Bossy, *ibid.*, 'Postscript', p. 287.

⁶⁷ 'OK' remained one of John's favourite terms of approval. According to Walsham 'very OK came close to high praise': Alexandra Walsham, 'John Bossy', *Past & Present*, 233 (2016), 3–11 at 10.

⁶⁸ In programme order they were: Lucy Wooding, Michael Questier, Trevor Johnson and Eamon Duffy.

there was still a lingering snobbery amongst the overwhelmingly Oxbridge-educated staff members of such universities as York, who regarded anywhere outside the Golden Triangle of Oxbridge and London for postgraduate research as somehow *infra dig*, and so gifted undergraduates tended to be steered south. The only exception made at York itself was for medieval studies, owing to the existence of the internationally well-regarded Centre for Medieval Studies (founded in 1968, only five years after the university itself opened to its first students).

As an indication of John's growing recognition outside the Anglophone world, both his essays on godparenthood and on the Mass were first published not in English, but, respectively, in Italian and French. As we shall see, his work was to enjoy a particularly warm reception in Italy. These all fed into what remains John's most ambitious and influential work of synthesis and interpretation, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (1985). It is in this essay, within the compass of relatively few pages, that John fully developed a theme which he had begun to sketch in his essay 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism' of 1962. This was to account for the fundamental shift in the relationship between Christianity and community in the West, in which the social practice of religion by the 'average soul' experienced a diminished sense of the Church as 'community', which was gradually replaced by awareness of the individual's relationship with God. For John, this was reflected in a fundamental shift in the economy of salvation as reflected in the sacrament of penance, where emphasis on social restitution (satisfaction) was superseded by that on inward disposition (contrition). John memorably encapsulated this shift, in a slightly later article, in terms of a change in 'moral arithmetic'.⁶⁹ This was from the seven deadly sins, particularly those of aversion – greed, pride and envy – which most threatened social peace within face-to-face communities, to one centred on the ten commandments. This accompanied a more general shift from religion as being understood in terms of communities of believers to their being conceived as confessions of belief. In other words, we have a transformation from kin to civil society, accompanied by the cult of law and obedience, which replaced that based on fraternity and the maintenance of peace in place of feud. This was also symbolised by a shift from symbol and ritual in traditional society to the intellectual and literary mode that characterised its civil counterpart.⁷⁰ This diminished religious world, in which Christianity no longer performed the social miracle of ritualised reconciliation as symbolised, above all, by the role of the pax – the kiss of peace – in the Mass, was superseded by one in which there

⁶⁹ 'Moral arithmetic: seven sins into ten commandments', in E. Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 214–34. For the medieval sources he used in this article, John was greatly indebted to his colleague Peter Biller. See Bossy papers where John's notes for this article contain also extensive references written by Peter.

⁷⁰ I have drawn here on Brendan Bradshaw's lucid summary of the book's argument in the *TLS* for 2 May 1986. The review itself was titled 'Utopia lost'.

was a new stress on difference and distinction; notably between the godly elite and the majority of the population, whereas previously, there had been a more socially integrated rapport between the priest and his flock. However, Brendan Bradshaw acutely noted that ‘Bossy’s analysis of the religion of late medieval Europe lent itself to idealisation since his interest was precisely the ideals embodied in its practice’.⁷¹ How does one reconcile John’s view of pre-Reformation religion in terms of ‘a saving mechanism of social integration’ with the reality of late medieval society, where such a state of ‘enhanced sociability’ was far from realisation; with war, riot, crime and oppression endemic?⁷²

John’s overwhelming reliance on the literary construction of ‘normative’ Christianity by members of ‘high’ or elite culture also came in for criticism from Bob Scribner. For the latter, John’s failure to engage with the problematic concept of ‘popular culture’, by effectively subsuming it under the blanket term of ‘traditional Christianity’ meant that we are denied any real insight into what people believed and how they actually behaved. By contrast, Scribner proposed that the sacramental religion of the late Middle Ages as actually practised revealed ‘confused and confusing syncretism between what was held up as normative and a wider range of practices and beliefs about which the “official” church had mixed and often hostile feelings’.⁷³ Finally, Scribner suggested that John’s emphasis on the socially integrative role of the sacraments, at the expense of their important ‘magical’ and instrumental role, reflected a liberal Catholic review that post-dated Vatican II (1962–65). Here John’s talent for flying a kite – what Eamon Duffy has termed ‘determined tentative empiricism [which] lets you know he’s deliberately trying out an idea to see if it works’ – has not always had positive impact when his ideas have been taken up by non-historians. To quote Duffy again: ‘That attraction to neat interpretive pattern-making, which could be so fruitful, could also be too neat.’⁷⁴

Nevertheless, as with the reception of John’s 1975 study of the English Catholic Community, the overall consensus of scholars was that his ‘great speculative energy’ had provided a suggestively bold and yet nuanced reconfiguration of a highly significant period in the history of Christianity in Europe, which has gone on to stimulate his colleagues not simply to refute what many see as an essentially idealised view of pre-Reformation Christianity, but to ponder and explore further the complexity that

⁷¹ Bradshaw, ‘Utopia lost’.

⁷² For a useful conspectus of the far from harmonious state of late medieval European society see, for example, Christopher Allmand (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. VII, c. 1415–1500 (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷³ Scribner’s review may be found in the *English Historical Review*, 101 (1986), 683–6, quotation at 685.

⁷⁴ Email communication from Eamon Duffy to the author, 9 September 2026. Eamon gave the example of how John’s nostalgic view of the pre-Reformation religion was particularly congenial to members of the Cambridge-based Radical Orthodoxy movement.

characterises the relationship between symbols, beliefs and rituals.⁷⁵ In addition, John had significantly reacted to the insights of his doctoral supervisor Evennett's posthumously published *Spirit of the Counter-Reformation* (1968), which notwithstanding the subsequent publication of such surveys as those by Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, Robert Bireley and Michael Mullett, still merits (re-)reading for its lucid and intelligent interpretation of how early modern Catholicism adapted, with a perhaps surprising degree of success, to both the political and spiritual changes of the age.⁷⁶ For Evennett, the activist individuality of the 'this worldly' spirituality of the Jesuits combined with the institutional ingenuity of a revived, centralising Papacy, so that Roman Catholicism was able to come to terms with the more individualistic and 'modern' environment it found itself in. Furthermore, it was Evennett, rather than Heinrich Schilling or Wolfgang Reinhard, who was one of the earliest advocates of the need to identify the common features of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.⁷⁷

For John, given that *Christianity in the West*, was, if nothing else, a powerful requiem for a religio-social 'world we have lost' – to borrow the phrase made famous by one of his favourite Cambridge lecturers when an undergraduate, Peter Laslett – it can be no surprise that after a period of youthful enthusiasm, he became increasingly unsympathetic to both of the modernising agents which his doctoral supervisor had identified: the papacy and the Society of Jesus.⁷⁸ For the former, in particular, John came to reserve particular scorn, and he held a special dislike for the nepotistic Paul V Borghese (r. 1605–21). A memorable exchange I had with John during some sabbatical leave he had in 1992 began when he told me that he had been 'Kremlin-watching'. Given the tumultuous events that were then unfolding with the collapse of the Soviet Union I thought he was speaking literally, but he then followed up by saying he had been reading the volumes relevant to the Counter-Reformation period of Ludwig von Pastor's *History of the Popes*!

⁷⁵ The phrase 'great speculative energy' is Francis Oakley's and taken from his review of *Christianity in the West* in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38 (1987), 293–5 at 293.

⁷⁶ R. Po-chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540–1770* (Cambridge University Press, 1998; 2nd edition 2005); R. Bireley, *The Refashioning of Catholicism 1450–1700* (Macmillan, 1999); M. Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (Routledge 1999).

⁷⁷ Albeit that for the English scholar, the comparisons were spiritual, whereas for the Germans they were societal: Evennett, *Spirit of the Counter-Reformation*, p. 9. Cf. Wolfgang Reinhard, 'Zwang zur Konfessionalisierung? Prolegomena zur einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 10 (1983), 257–77; Heinz Schilling, 'Die Konfessionalisierung im Reich. Religiöser und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Deutschland zwischen 1555 und 1620,' *Historisches Zeitschrift*, 246 (1988), 1–45.

⁷⁸ 'You can see that my anti-papal and anti-Jesuit frame of mind is a reaction to earlier enthusiasms.' Letter dated 20 April 2002 to the author.

For the inhabitants of a peninsula where there existed a venerable intellectual tradition which regarded the papacy, aided and abetted by its Praetorian Guard of Jesuits, as largely responsible for ensuring that Italy remained politically fragmented (and intellectually emasculated) until the mid-19th century, John's powerful story of a 'traditional' Christianity which had been treacherously 'translated' by the Counter-Reformation had an especially powerful resonance.⁷⁹ For Italian historians of religion working within the liberal Catholic tradition, such as the brothers-in-law Giuseppe Alberigo (1926–2007) and Paolo Prodi (1932–2016), John's critique chimed very well with their view of the early modern papacy as a centralising institution determined on reducing jurisdictional autonomy by blocking the pastoral initiatives of would be reforming bishops, such as Gabriele Paleotti, bishop then archbishop of Bologna (1522–97), who with the pope as both his secular and spiritual lord found himself truly between a rock and a hard place.⁸⁰ For slightly younger scholars working in the secular (lay/*laico*) tradition, most notably Adriano Prosperi (b. 1939) and Massimo Firpo (b. 1946), John's characterisation of Reformed Catholicism as interpreted by such a tireless legislator as Carlo Borromeo (Archbishop of Milan, 1564–84; canonised 1610) as a 'command economy of salvation'⁸¹ or as a Catholic Geneva, accorded very well with their view of Roman Catholicism as having achieved hegemonic status in the peninsula and for having, with the assistance of the Inquisition, the Confession box and of missionaries to rural villages, colonised the consciences and thereby ensured the acquiescence, even 'defeat' of the Italian people.⁸² Accordingly, there exists not only an Italian translation of *Christianity in the West*, but also a collection of six of John's key essays linked to this book's theme, whose title says it all: *From the*

⁷⁹ These were the very terms used by the Italian scholar Adriano Prosperi in his review of *Christianity in the West* for *Quaderni storici*, 66, (1987), 961–86 at 971: 'Rispetto alla tradizione, la traduzione è un tradimento'. For further discussion of the specifically Italian variant of 'Reformation envy' see my essay: 'In Sarpi's Shadow: coping with Trent the Italian way', in *Studi in memoria di Cesare Mozzarelli*, 2 vols (Vita e Pensiero, 2008), I, pp. 585–606. Cf. Neil Tarrant, 'Science, Religion and Italy's Seventeenth-century decline', *Zygon*, 54 (2019), 1125–44.

⁸⁰ John reviewed sympathetically Prodi's important study in its English translation, *The Papal Prince* (1987; Italian edn 1982, which was reprinted with a new afterword 2006), in *The Tablet* (27 August 1988). My thanks to Simon Johnson for his assistance in procuring a copy of this review.

⁸¹ Bossy, *Peace in the post-Reformation*, p. 12.

⁸² Adriano Prosperi, *Tribunali della Coscienza* (Einaudi, 1996), premessa. I also have a distinct recollection that John described Borromeo as 'a gauleiter of the Counter-Reformation', though I don't think he ever committed this to print. However, John did turn down the invitation to give the keynote at the annual Dies Academicus of the Accademia di S. Carlo in Milan on 11 November 1995, I believe, with no little relief. Instead, he sent a text based on part of his first Birkbeck Lecture on the moral tradition in Italy. In the notebook containing his 'List of Writings' already referred to, John notes that his lecture would be read out in Italian translation 'by Danilo Zardin, who doesn't agree!' (One can almost hear John's chuckle at the prospect.) This text was subsequently revised for publication as: 'Carlo Borromeo e la tradizione morale', *Studia Borromaeica*, 10, (1996), 39–51.

Community to the Individual: a social history of the sacraments in early modern Europe, which also has an insightful introduction by Adriano Prosperi.⁸³

That John's wariness of the Counter-Reformation papacy was inherited from Evennett's awareness and more positive estimation of the institutional density and assertiveness of that institution there can be little doubt. Here one can also trace, I believe, historiographical roots which go back, via the polyglot Lord Acton (the founder of Modern History at Cambridge and sometime fellow of Trinity College, of which Evennett was to be fellow from 1926), to Döllinger, von Ranke and the German school of Archive positivists.⁸⁴ I mention this not just for the sake of pedantic completeness, but owing to the fact that German historiography has also been influential on Italian historians' own understanding of their religious and cultural history. This, I believe, helps explain the particular affinity some Italian historians have felt with John's work. Perhaps it will be a surprise to some readers that I don't have in mind either Ludwig von Pastor (1854–1928) or Hubert Jedin (1900–80), whose monumental treatments, respectively, of the early modern papacy and of the debates and decisions of the Council of Trent, may be incrementally superseded in interpretation, but whose findings will likely continue to be profitably mined by scholars for generations to come. Rather, I am referring to the work of Heinrich Schilling (b. 1942) and, particularly, Wolfgang Reinhard (b. 1937), specifically, their elaboration in the Protestant and Catholic contexts, respectively, of the concept of 'Social Discipline' (*Sozialdisziplinierung*).⁸⁵ Although ultimately deriving from Max Weber, this term was reformulated by Gerhard Oestreich (1910–78), first in the 1960s, in neo-stoic terms when he sought to characterise the absolutist state as 'the disciplining of individuals to achieve corporate order'.⁸⁶ For Reinhard and Schilling this process helps us to understand the process of confession-building. Already by 1982 this reconfiguration of the way to understand religious change, which up until then had been cast in terms, first and foremost, of doctrinal change, was the subject of articles in the journal of the Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento (now known as the Fondazione

⁸³ *L'Occidente Cristiano 1400–1700* (Einaudi, 1990); *Dalla Comunità all'individuo. Per una storia sociale dei sacramenti nell'Europa moderna* (Einaudi, 1998).

⁸⁴ It remains a mystery to me how the presence of Acton's library of over 60,000 books, with its particular strength in the history of the papacy, as a separate collection within Cambridge University Library remained, to the best of my knowledge, unremarked upon by either Evennett or John, at least in their published writing.

⁸⁵ See above note 77 and also: Reinhard, 'Gegenreformation als Modernisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters', *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte*, 68 (1977), 226–52; idem., 'Reformation, Counter Reformation and the early modern state: a reassessment', *Catholic Historical Review*, 75 (1989), 383–405; Schilling, 'Confessional Europe', in Tom Brady *et al.* (eds), *Handbook of European History*, 2 vols. (Brill, 1994–95), II, pp. 641–81.

⁸⁶ Gerhard Oestreich, 'The Structure of the Absolutist state', in G. Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the early modern State* (Cambridge University Press, 1982; 1st German edn 1969), pp. 258–73.

Bruno Kessler/FBK).⁸⁷ This institution was directed between 1973 and 1997 by Paolo Prodi, who was also responsible for convening a conference just over a decade later (in 1993) on the same topic, whose proceedings were published the following year.⁸⁸ Under Prodi's period as director, the Institute widely disseminated the paradigm of social discipline, so that it arguably became even more influential in the Italian peninsula than in Germany.

However, as might be expected from a scholar who, in common with his heroine Margaret Thatcher, has repeatedly insisted (not only) for the early modern period that 'society' should be spelled with a lower-case 's', John himself was never happy with the concept of social discipline, particularly after it took on a sinister, all-embracing, Foucauldian fuzziness as the dark side of the 'Enlightenment project'.⁸⁹ Indeed, it became one of the targets of John's Birkbeck Lectures of 1995, which we shall deal with only after considering John's next book project: its genesis and, in particular, its reception.

Giordano Bruno and the Embassy affair was published in September 1991. Its central claim was that an informer, who went by the code name 'Henry Fagot', working as a mole from inside the household of the French ambassador to the English court, Michel de Castelnau, Sieur de Mauvissière on behalf of Elizabeth I's spy-master Francis Walsingham, was none other than the Italian philosopher and renegade Dominican friar, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600).⁹⁰ This was a time of high-stakes diplomatic tension between England and France, which was then in the midst of a half a century of religious civil war. At this particular juncture (1583–85), the ultra-Catholic Guise faction in France was actively supporting efforts to remove Elizabeth I from power, and de Castelnau was (at the time) allied with them. In her stead, the Guise supported the candidacy of Elizabeth I's cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, widow of Francis II, King of France (r. 1559–60) and herself daughter of a member of the Guise family, who had been married to her father, James V of Scotland (r. 1513–42). In John's uncompromising summary judgement Fagot/Bruno:

... systematically betrayed his master Castelnau, who did nothing but good for him, was extremely loyal to him, and regarded him as a friend. He persuaded his [Mauvissière's] secretary to betray him. He procured, in so far as it was in his power to do it, the arrest, torture and execution of Francis Throckmorton, whom Castelnau said

⁸⁷ See the contributions by Wolfgang Reinhard and Mohammed Rassem in *Annali/Jahrbuch*, 8 (1982).

⁸⁸ Paolo Prodi (ed.), *Disciplina dell'anima, disciplina del corpo e disciplina della società tra medioevo ed età moderna* (Il Mulino, 1994).

⁸⁹ Mary Flannery, in her funeral address noted above in n. 52, also observed: 'By his late twenties he had settled back into his natural Conservatism. Soon he was denouncing everything even vaguely left-leaning, and later, whenever his train passed through Grantham, bowing to Mrs Thatcher's birth-place. In the end his loathing of the EU drove him into the arms of UKIP, and we heard a lot about it.'

⁹⁰ John Bossy, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy affair* (Yale University Press, 1991).

that he loved as himself, and by whose fate he was appallingly harrowed. He did all of this while buttering up Castelnau in three dedicatory epistles with fulsome expressions of esteem, friendship and undying gratitude for looking after him and sticking up for him. This was quite exceptionally disgraceful conduct, and it must gravely damage Bruno's reputation from now on.⁹¹

On the closing page of the book's main text, John went as far as to say that, in the light of this treacherous behaviour and its terrible consequences, when the time came for Bruno to be put to death it, by being burnt alive by the civic authorities on the orders of the Roman Inquisition on 17 February 1600, 'it served him right'.⁹²

The book was, needless to say, something of a *success de scandale*. It not only shared the Wolfson Prize for 1991 (with Alan Bullock's *Hitler and Stalin: parallel lives*), but also – in what is surely a unique combination – won the Crime Writer Association's Gold Dagger for non-fiction. The award of the latter prize particularly delighted John.⁹³ Its wider critical reception in the Anglophone world was also overwhelmingly positive, if not so unanimously convinced of the certainty of John's identification of Bruno with Fagot as was the author. The admiring review by Hugh Trevor-Roper in the *New York Review of Books* especially gratified John.⁹⁴ In its closing paragraph the reviewer concluded: 'This is a marvellous book which, whether right or wrong, equally multiplies rather than resolves the mystery of Giordano Bruno. Perhaps it is right. Can we believe in this new character?' The final sentence of Trevor-Roper's review answers his own question when he adds: 'I suppose we can. I have known one such.' The reference was most likely to the notorious double-agent, Kim Philby (1912–88), with whom Trevor-Roper had worked closely in military intelligence during and immediately after the Second World War and continued to see until at least 1957.⁹⁵ Philby died in Moscow only a year after John began writing his book, having lived there since he precipitously fled Beirut, where he worked as a journalist and undercover spy for MI6 as well as for the Russians, in January 1963.⁹⁶

As I have already observed, publication dates can be misleading. Although the Bruno book was published six years after *Christianity in the West* (1985), its genesis predated the publication of the latter by two years (1983), when John spent his first sabbatical from York in London. I happened to bump into him at Covent Garden

⁹¹ Bossy, *Giordano Bruno*, pp. 143, 145.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁹³ '... I never saw him so delighted as when he set off to a dinner in Chancery Lane and returned with the gold dagger of the Crime Writers' Association for his book on Giordano Bruno and the spy network of Tudor England.' Mary Flannery, funeral address as above nn. 52 and 89).

⁹⁴ 'Was Giordano Bruno a mole?', *NYRB*, 19 December 1991.

⁹⁵ Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010), p. 284 and index references.

⁹⁶ Bossy tells us he started the book in November 1987. See Bossy, *Giordano Bruno*, p. xi.

during his sabbatical and he told me he was going back to see what he could do with his PhD thesis. At the latter's core, it will be recalled, is a microstudy of (mostly unofficial) Anglo-French diplomacy and collaboration, mainly between English Catholics and French co-religionists, interwoven inextricably, if uneasily, with the correspondence between Elizabeth's spy-master, Francis Walsingham, and his informers on the ground in both France and London itself (including the French embassy). Although John only began writing the book, on his own admission, in 1987, I think it is important to underscore the organic connection not only between *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair* and his doctorate, which was awarded exactly thirty years before, but also with his subsequent volume of 2001, *Under the Molehill*. There is also a case to be made for including John's study of Lord Henry Howard, which, if completed, would have constituted the final part of a triptych that might justifiably have taken its name from the article which first made his name, 'The Character of Elizabethan Catholicism'.

The reception of *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy affair* was not, however, unanimously positive. One of the earliest reviews published in an academic journal appeared in the *Heythrop Journal*.⁹⁷ Its author, Jill Kraye, was not an historian of religion or even of early modern Britain but, appropriately enough, in view of Bruno's significance to the history of ideas, of Renaissance philosophy. She also worked at the University of London's Warburg Institute, dedicated to the history of the classical tradition, which had also been the home of perhaps the most famous of Bruno's champions in modern times – Dame Frances Yates (1899–1981), whose book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) is still in print after over sixty years. Kraye took particular issue with John's chronological re-ordering of the succession of letters that Fagot sent to Walsingham, which was necessary if they were to coincide with the period when we know Bruno to have been in residence at the embassy. There was also the matter of why de Castelnau, as an experienced diplomat working at an especially delicate time in Anglo-French relations, would employ an ex-Dominican friar and excommunicate priest (Bruno) as his chaplain, which was Fagot's declared identity in his reports, rather than simply as a gentleman of his household, which we know from other evidence was Bruno's widely perceived role and status in London. The French ambassador's behaviour is particularly hard to fathom given that during his time in England Bruno made no attempt to behave discreetly, instead seeking the limelight at every opportunity: whether it be giving offence at Oxford University, or publishing six dialogues in the Italian vernacular – now considered masterpieces not only of philosophy but also of Italian literature. The latter were clearly aimed at capturing the attention and patronage of the culturally (though not confessionally) Italophile

⁹⁷ Jill Kraye, 'John Bossy on Giordano Bruno', *Heythrop Journal*, 33(1992), 324–7.

members of Elizabeth's court, such as Fulke Greville (1554–1628) and Philip Sidney (1554–86).⁹⁸ Furthermore, these dialogues were as religiously heterodox as they were linguistically brilliant in their proto-baroque prolixity, and so a world away from the terse, matter-of-fact style required by espionage. Ultimately, for Kraye, as for Trevor-Roper, notwithstanding the bravura of John's analysis and argument, she concluded that: 'the evidence, though massive, is entirely circumstantial and will not, despite Bossy's claims to the contrary, convince "a moderately determined sceptic" provided the most rigorous standards of proof are applied.'⁹⁹ However, she went one step further than Trevor-Roper when she wrote: 'the story lacks one essential element: a smoking gun.'¹⁰⁰ Thus for Kraye, John's story was simply the latest of successive legends that Bruno's brilliant career has generated since his judicial murder in 1600. After a period of censored (and self-censored) silence that was only broken by interest in the origins of Hegelian idealism in early 19th-century Germany, Bruno was seen, successively, as martyr of free thought and poster boy of anti-clericalism during the Risorgimento; pioneer of the Scientific Revolution as forerunner of Galileo in the early 20th; and then, at the time when John was researching and writing his book, as Hermetic magus and master of the Occult.

John remained disappointed, I believe to his dying day, that he had had to retract the unqualified claim that he was simply recounting a 'true story'. This retraction occurred in the postscript to the Italian translation of his Bruno book; though it should be noted that his retraction remained only partial and that his original assertion was unaltered on the first page of his prefatory note 'To the Reader' in the Italian edition.¹⁰¹ More significantly, no changes were made to the English paperback edition issued in 1992. To understand this reluctance to accept that his speculation might be mistaken or even unwarranted, one needs to grasp the fact that by this point in his career John had become particularly exercised by what was at stake, epistemologically speaking, when crafting narrative accounts of the past. As he put it in the second paragraph of his opening manifesto 'To the Reader' in his book:

⁹⁸ Mordechai Feingold, 'Giordano Bruno in England, revisited', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 67:3 (2004), 329–46.

⁹⁹ Kraye, 'John Bossy on Giordano Bruno', p. 324.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bossy, *Giordano Bruno e il mistero dell'ambasciata. Filosofi e spie, eretici e principi, intrighi e congiure nella Londra di Elisabetta I*, trans. Lydia Salerno (Garzanti, 1992), pp. 333–45. The postscript is dated August 1992. The author also took the opportunity here to express his personal admiration for Bruno and clarify what he had meant when he stated that Bruno's horrible fate had been somehow merited, at least according to the code of behaviour that the Italian philosopher had himself appeared to invoke.

I am a historian, not a writer of fiction, and have written the book in the conviction that the duty of a historian is to tell true stories about the past. It is often said that historians cannot do this, or have something better to do. One of my motives in writing this book has been to intimate that both these opinions are false.¹⁰²

John went on to contrast this belief in the independence of facts from those who discover them with historians such as E.H. Carr (1892–1982), whom he accused of going along with ‘the Leninist notion ... that facts are one thing and historical facts another’, and that the latter owed their authority only to the persuasive power of rhetoric enshrined in ‘discourse’. This last term was one for which John reserved particular scorn, caricaturing it in terms of giving off ‘a sort of phlogiston of occult meanings which animates all communicative matter’.¹⁰³ Although he went on to modify slightly this position when he returned to the world of Elizabethan espionage in *Under the Molehill* (2001), by conceding that ‘history is a species of the genus story’, this was only in order to restate his methodological position more clearly, even as he admitted that his identification of Henry Fagot with Giordano Bruno was not as unquestionably true as he had originally argued.¹⁰⁴ In the final observation of his prefatory Note to the Reader to the Bruno book, John observed how the exiled status of his central protagonist as he navigated his way through English society evoked memories of the 1930s: ‘In the heavy atmosphere of undeclared doctrinal warfare which prevailed before the lightning finally struck [with the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587 and the launch of the Spanish Armada the following year] the traitor, the conspirator, the spy, the counter-spy and the *agent-provocateur* were a normal recourse of governments’.¹⁰⁵

If one were to write a fuller account of John Bossy and the Giordano Bruno affair, I think that a suitable subtitle would be something along the lines of: ‘language under strain’. For what interested John throughout his life as an historian was the craft of writing and how language can conceal as well as reveal. A consequence of this was that language had to be tested in the crucible of debate and argument.¹⁰⁶ For John, words mattered and how they might be used (and abused) was very important to him. Style was very much the man. It was surely no coincidence that one of his closest and longest friendships was with the literary scholar, Nick (P.N.) Furbank (1920–2014), who

¹⁰² Bossy, *Giordano Bruno*, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Bossy continued: ‘If you are a historian it [discourse] decides what is to count as a fact, and constitutes the object you think you are recording.’ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Bossy, *Under the Molehill: an Elizabethan spy story* (Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 2–3, quotation at 3. See here the perceptive review of the book by Pat Collinson: ‘Walsingham’s Plumber’, *London Review of Books*, 5 July 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Bossy, *Giordano Bruno*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Flannery again: ‘John was always a pugnacious conversationalist, (shouts of Rubbish! And Nonsense!) and argued anything into the ground.’

although he overlapped briefly with John at Cambridge (but in a different subject and college: as lecturer and tutor in English at Emmanuel 1947–53), began their friendship in c. 1965 (as suggested by the dedication of *Christianity in the West*) when both of them lived in London. Like John, Nick had a lifelong struggle with a stammer and also, similarly, remained an intellectual ‘free spirit’; what Christopher Hawtree in his obituary of Furbank for the *Guardian* (9 July 2014) described as: ‘a Forsterian humanist, treating each life on its own terms’.¹⁰⁷ As John put it in the published version of his inaugural lecture, given at York on 11 February 1981, and subsequently revised for publication in *Past & Present*: ‘words matter ... without a sense of their history they become manipulable in the cause of obfuscation’.¹⁰⁸ The principal target of this essay was anachronistic interpretations of the concepts ‘society’ and ‘religion’.¹⁰⁹ Nothing offended John more than badly written prose and poorly reasoned argument. As Alexandra Walsham recounts from her time serving with him on the editorial board of *Past & Present* (on which he remained for thirty years, 1973–2003), when his peer review of one submission read simply: ‘Not on your life. Dreadful waffle. Written with a shovel. Rattles about in its own cage’.¹¹⁰

Finally, as we have already seen in the testimony of his Belfast colleague, Sandy Grant, John was not only able to see another’s point of view, but rather courted debate. In at least one recorded case known to me, he might even respond to disagreement by strengthening his opponent’s arguments.¹¹¹ A consequence of this was that, as happened

¹⁰⁷ Furbank was also the biographer of Italo Svevo, E.M. Forster, Diderot and Defoe. He contributed an essay to the *festschrift* I edited for John ‘On the Historical Novel’. For reasons of thematic and chronological coherence imposed by the first envisaged publisher, Brill, I was asked to exclude it (along with several others). Unfortunately, when I moved to a more accommodating publisher, Ashgate, which permitted the inclusion of contributions outside the late medieval/early modern period, I must have felt too embarrassed to go back and ask Furbank to resubmit his essay. It was subsequently published in *Raritan*, 23:3 (Winter 2004), 94–114.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Some elementary forms of Durkheim’, *Past & Present*, 95 (1982), 3–18 at 17.

¹⁰⁹ For further reflections on what John believed was meant by ‘social’ and ‘religious’ when writing a social history of Christianity, see his review essay of Charles Trinkhaus & Heiko Oberman (eds), *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance religion* (1974): ‘Holiness and Society’, *Past & Present*, 75 (1977); 119–37. Cf. John’s review essay dedicated, *inter alia*, to Keith Wrightson’s *English Society, 1580–1680* (1982): ‘Out of the system: Social England’, *Encounter*, 59:3–4 (1982), 46–51, which offered a critique of the ‘floppy indefinitions’ of ‘the social’.

¹¹⁰ Walsham, ‘John Bossy’, p. 10.

¹¹¹ Eamon Duffy recalled sending John a draft of an article which was later published as: ‘The English Secular Clergy and the Counter-Reformation’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 34:2 (1983), 214–30. Eamon disagreed fundamentally with John’s characterisation of the English secular clergy as ‘trapped in a sterile wilderness of unreality’, largely untouched by the Tridentine and Borromean currents of continental reform. ‘He [John] sent me a long letter the gist of which was that I was probably right, but my argument could be strengthened in the following four or five ways, which he listed! It was entirely typical of his intellectual generosity.’ Communication via email, 27 July 2026

with his argument about Bruno, though it was not an easy thing to do, as we have seen, when faced with such criticism as that made by Jill Kraye, John subsequently drew back from claiming that he was recounting 'a true story'. In other words, he was not beyond admitting he had got something wrong. Another example of this, from later the same decade, is to be found in the final chapter of John's *Peace in the post-Reformation* (1998), which merits an extended quotation:

I come to the church papists, and to Alexandra Walsham's recent book on them: a triumph, if I may say so, of youth over age. She says that church papists were important people who have been downplayed for sectarian purposes by previous writers coming from the stable of 'recusant history'. Too true, and *mea culpa*. She holds, positively, that they existed not in a muddle but in a stable state of 'semi-separation' in, rather than from, the Church of England.¹¹²

In these lectures John traced the post-Reformation survival of a 'moral tradition' which he believed lay at the heart of 'traditional Christianity'. This took the form of peace-making and the settlement of feud.

It [the moral tradition] joins together three items: the notion or practical instinct that to be a Christian means to love your neighbour, and in particular your enemy; the fact that in these times and places it was very likely that people might be in a state of enmity towards others, which would call for arrangements of peace-making if it was to be resolved; and the historic or perhaps archaic connection between these arrangements and the sites, rites and persons of the church.¹¹³

The tension between this moral tradition and social discipline is an abiding concern of the lectures and it will be no surprise to those who have read so far, to discover that the Milan of Borromeo was very much on the side of the social discipline and devalued the traditional role of the Catholic clergy as peacemakers. However, to John's own self-confessed surprise, he found in the Italian peninsula those arch vectors of modernity – the Jesuits – involved in such 'traditional' practices.¹¹⁴ Turning to Germany: 'In the teeth of Luther's doctrine about the Eucharist, which made faith, not charity, the condition of reception ... the Lutheran pastors ... seem to have acknowledged in their practice that social enmity was a motor of Christian society.'¹¹⁵ In this way, according to John, Lutheran churches succeeded in drawing to themselves the mainstream of what he would call 'traditional Christianity' in Germany. This led John to conclude that after a relatively

¹¹² *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, pp. 86–87. Bossy is referring to Alexandra Walsham's *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (The Boydell Press, 1993), which was reissued in paperback with a thoughtful preface in 1999.

¹¹³ *Peace in the post-Reformation*, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–29.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53–71. The quotation, however, is taken from John's review essay: 'The German Reformation after Moeller', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 45 (1994), 673–84 at 678.

brief period of papal episcopal aggression (Roman Catholic *disciplina*), local/traditional religion survived in the Italian peninsula and parts of Germany (though France remained a special case).¹¹⁶ In other words, the ‘translation’ from pre-Reformation magic to Reformation prose was incomplete. This position brought John closer than he had been for some time to the ‘revisionist mainstream’ of social historians of belief, such as Bob Scribner, David Gentilcore and Trevor Johnson, who argued in the late 1990s that the transformation of traditional religion was gradual and slow; so that the key terms of analysis should include such concepts as ‘mediation’ and ‘creative adaptation’ rather than ‘conflict’ and ‘substitution.’¹¹⁷

Retirement and legacy 2000-the present

When John retired from the University of York he was only 67 and he was to live another fifteen years. However, aside from the appearance of his short book, *Under the Molehill* in 2001, he was to publish very little before his death. The bulk of his energy was devoted to his study of Lord Henry Howard, who described himself as ‘a man obscured’, but who might be more helpfully regarded as ‘the pre-eminent example of Elizabethan Catholic loyalism’ or Church papist.¹¹⁸ Howard thus embodied John’s career-long interest in those Catholics who refused to embrace recusancy and distrusted the Jesuit mission. Howard lived a long life and had to negotiate the twists and turns of no fewer than four reigns in a period of particularly tumultuous change. However, John was clearly not interested in writing a conventional Life and Times biography; rather his focus was clearly on understanding the inner man, and only subsequently how this might have impacted on Howard’s actual behaviour. One of the most original and fascinating sections of John’s draft material consists of his detailed analysis of Howard’s self-composed prayers, which is a tour-de-force of philological focus and playful interpretive bravura, fully on a level with anything in John’s published oeuvre.¹¹⁹ Reading these pages put me in mind of the *Annaliste* project to embrace total history by recovering the *mentalité* (mindset) or *outillage mentale* (mental equipment) of one’s subject. In this respect, however, Howard represented a particular challenge as he was the kind of academic who was the diametric

¹¹⁶Summary of a personal communication from John in early 1999 written in response to my article ‘In search of Local Knowledge: rewriting early modern Italian religious history’, *Cristianesimo nella storia*, 19 (1998), 255–96.

¹¹⁷See for example: David Gentilcore, *From Bishop to Witch: the system of the sacred in Terra d’Otranto* (Manchester University Press, 1992); Trevor Johnson & Robert Scribner (eds), *Popular Religion in Germany and Central Europe, 1400–1800* (Macmillan, 1996).

¹¹⁸Alex Walsham, email to Peter Biller, 26 December 2018.

¹¹⁹For John’s provisional thoughts on this topic, see his contribution to Margaret Aston’s *festschrift* above n. 51.

opposite of John himself: pedantic, humourless and wordy. As John put it in a letter to me in April 2002, when he was still at a relatively early stage in his research:

I am back at work ploughing through the voluminous paper-covering (*vergar di carte* – is that right? (Bruno)) of Lord Henry Howard. Some time I am going to plumb your knowledge of the sixteenth-century intellectual system because this man, who has no creative talents as far as I can see, is a sort of walking embodiment of it e.g. he has made me read Castiglione, of which he possessed an annotated copy which I hope to see, and while I would much rather he had been reading Boccaccio we have to live with what we have got.

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, John never did reach out to me – though he over-estimated my prowess in the history of late-Renaissance thought even as, once I had achieved my doctorate and became his colleague, he rarely lost the opportunity to tease me for my ‘learning’, to which I would invariably retort with a smile that he never let inconvenient facts get in the way of his arguments and ideas. However, rather than focus on unfinished projects, which in this particular case I don’t believe would have added, even when completed, much beyond illustrative detail in support of insights which John had already contributed to our understanding of early modern Roman Catholicism, I think it is important to mention an area where John’s ‘great speculative energy’ continues to influence historians and in which he continued to publish until 2004, besides mentoring colleagues and younger scholars until shortly before he was taken to hospital after a fall in the early autumn of 2015.¹²⁰ I am referring to the field of the history of peace-making to which my colleague Stuart Carroll has himself made such a significant contribution. Stuart believes that John helped bring about a ‘Copernican Revolution’ in our understanding by placing front and centre how ordinary people made use of the law and which he, together with such Italian colleagues as Paolo Broggio, are taking forward in exciting ways.¹²¹

That said, the very last page of John’s notebook ‘List of Writings’ dated 2015 takes us back to John’s career-long engagement with the history of the English Catholic community. It lists just two items, both of which occasioned reflection on his life’s work as one of the most consistently thoughtful and thought-provoking historians of pre-modern religious practice the anglophone world has known. The first was commissioned by the journal *British Catholic History*, which had recently been (re)launched as a successor to *Recusant History*, to which John had made a good number of contributions, particularly in his early career.¹²² He took the opportunity of this invitation to reflect on the changing historiographical landscape over the fifty-six years since he wrote his first piece for

¹²⁰ ‘Practices of Satisfaction, 1215–1700’, *Studies in Church History*, 40 (2004), 106–18.

¹²¹ Stuart Carroll, *Enmity and Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), p. 15. See also Paolo Broggio, *Criminal Justice and Peace-making in Early Modern Italy: governing hatred, c. 1500–1700* (Durham University/IMEMS Press, 2025; Rome: Viella 2021).

¹²² ‘Recusant history and after’, *British Catholic History*, 32 (2015), 271–9

Recusant History. The second is the Afterword that John wrote in response to the papers delivered at a conference held at the University of Durham in 2014 to celebrate the work of Eamon Duffy entitled ‘What is Early Modern English Catholicism?’¹²³ I will spare the reader a summary of John’s summary of the conference papers, which merit direct consultation. However, I will attempt to summarise his first and final remarks where, in characteristically trenchant fashion, John takes issue with some of the key organising concepts of the conference. It is vintage Bossy in its intolerance of what he considered to be ‘floppy indefinitions’. In response to Brad Gregory and James Kelley’s discussion of the significance of martyrs and martyrdom to the conference theme, John casts doubt on the purported link being made between martyrs and confessional identity: ‘Martyrs, I think, can create collectivities but not communities. The attribution to churches of martyrs ancient or modern does not make them vehicles of community ...’¹²⁴ He then goes on to invoke an autobiographical reference: ‘I grew up in a quasi-parish dedicated to St Peter-in-Chains, who was a mystery to me’, which in his original typescript was joined with a further personal example: ‘the next quasi-parish which had a congregation of poor Irish was dedicated to St Mellitus, of whom I am sure they had never heard’, before concluding (also in the printed version): ‘Congregation is what creates community.’¹²⁵ John goes on to locate this community-building as the product often of confraternities rather than of martyrdom in deed or recollection. The other two concepts he takes issue with, which were used as section headings for the volume are: ‘identity’ and ‘memory’. Concerning the former he writes:

‘Identity’ strikes me as pretty impenetrable ... Since the invention of ID we assume it to mean ‘What one is’ or, derivatively, ‘What a group is’. Answers to these questions are, in the first case, innumerable, so useless, and in the second either platitudinous or contestable ... [A]n alternative, probably better, definition of identity [is]: ‘What one believes one is’ or ‘What a group believes it is.’¹²⁶

Turning, finally, to ‘memory’, John candidly admits: ‘I am foxed by the idea that this equals history.’

Groups may perhaps have an identity, but they have no memory. There is indeed something I should call the historical subconscious, which is public, as in Waterloo Station or Downton Abbey, but if it is unconscious it is not remembered and if it is known it is history. ‘Tradition’ seems a better word, one of course with a venerable history, current at the time ...¹²⁷

¹²³ ‘Afterword’ to James E. Kelly & Susan Royal (eds), *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, memory and Counter-Reformation* (Brill, 2017), pp. 246–54

¹²⁴ ‘Afterword’, p. 246.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 253.

¹²⁷ Ibid. pp. 253–54.

Leaving to one side whether the authors actually intended to claim that memory had the same epistemological status as history, the rhetorical ‘if not a, then b’ presentation of argument is pure Bossy; designed to sting and provoke a response. Unfortunately, since the typescript to this afterword ends with the date 17 June 2015, we know this was to be John’s published swansong and so he could never engage in any subsequent debate the piece might have provoked.

Epilogue: the Bossy factor

John was taken to hospital after a fall from bed broke his hip in late September that year. His heart and circulatory system, weakened by decades of smoking, meant that he never recovered but got progressively weaker, until he died, having never left hospital, the following month. Of the obituaries that were published after his death, I have already drawn on that by John’s *Past & Present* colleague, Alexandra Walsham, but there was also one written by Lucy Wooding for *British Catholic History* that deserves notice and with which I will end this memoir.¹²⁸ In addition, his passing was recognised by two (very different) Italian scholars, Adriano Prosperi and Anna Foa, whose perspectives complement those provided by their anglophone counterparts.¹²⁹ Prosperi, whose role in having some of John’s work translated into Italian has already been noted, was born in rural Tuscany and had a conventional Catholic upbringing. He might perhaps be regarded as later becoming a ‘soft’ anticlerical and, having enjoyed a conventional academic career, ended it at the elite Scuola Normale in Pisa. Foa, on the other hand, was a daughter of the radical left – her parents Vittorio Foa and Lisa Guia were key figures in post-Italian politics and culture – and she later embraced her Jewish heritage. Foa only embarked on an academic career in middle age, after a time in radical politics. For both Prosperi and Foa, what impressed them most about John was his capacity to think beyond such tired labels as ‘Reformation’ and ‘Counter-Reformation’. Prosperi accounted for John’s non-conformity vis à vis traditional historiography as owing to the fact that he had been born into what was a minority culture within the UK: Roman Catholicism. Foa, likewise, admired what she termed John’s ‘lack of dogmatism’, as well as his focus on the ways in which ‘ordinary people’ accessed the holy and had their experience of religion shaped by the sacraments. However, for Foa, who also appreciated the speculative energy of John’s book on Bruno, which Prosperi had passed over in silence, John was a figure to be admired not only for *Christianity in the West*, but for all his books for their questioning power. Surprisingly, she also felt that Bossy had been unfairly neglected in

¹²⁸ Lucy Wooding, ‘Professor John Bossy FBA (1933–2015)’, *British Catholic History*, 33 (2016), 1–8.

¹²⁹ Adriano Prosperi, *La Repubblica*, 27 October 2015; Anna Foa, *L’Osservatore romano*, 29 October 2015.

Italy; even more surprisingly, her obituary appeared in the official newspaper of the Vatican, *L'Osservatore Romano*, which would have made John chuckle. However, any such emotion this provoked might have been accompanied by a rueful awareness of the irony which had led such a figure of the Italian left to acknowledge his intellectual achievement so fulsomely. This is to be explained, it has been confirmed to me, by the fact that John's principled nostalgia for community over modernity might not have sat well with the view of more mainstream scholars such as Prodi and Prosperi, for whom it remained axiomatic that the Roman Church, for all its limited capacity to reform itself, should still be regarded as having ultimately contributed, in some fundamental way, to Italian unification.

For Lucy Wooding, John's achievement was centred on bringing a fresh and innovative approach: 'to one of the more antiquated and intractable branches of English history'. Identified by Wooding as an 'historical free-thinker', she noted how John approached the subject not only from a different place, but also asked different questions: 'This is why, when others were still writing church history, Bossy from the first wrote the history of religion.' In the *English Catholic Community* John had defined Catholicism: 'not in terms of authority or doctrine, but in terms of communities and practices, relationships and networks'. His insistence on 'behaviour rather than belief ... pointed to a different way of writing religious history', before adding: 'he would rather know what the Reformation felt like than where it came from.' Indeed, Wooding speculated that perhaps 'his most lasting legacy will be the way in which his thought shaped the history of religion in its broadest sense.' However, she too was alive to John's attention to language:

... to read his work is to emerge both cleansed and energized by the honesty and pragmatism of his writing. Few could paint in the bigger picture with quite such relaxed assurance coupled with such an unworried acknowledgement of probable error.

This seems to be an appropriate place to end this memoir of a scholar who remained equally at home working on the micro- and the macro levels, and who until the end matched intellectual boldness with a rare capacity for self-critical reflection.

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(pp. xv–xxix). I would like to thank warmly Pete and Miggy Biller who have shared with me their recollections of John Bossy over thirty-six years as colleague and friend. As literary executor of John’s estate, Pete also helped me sort through several boxes of his papers, which included drafts of his final, incomplete study of Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton (1540–1614). Next, I would like to thank Alex Walsham for her various kindnesses in relation to the composition of this memoir, and Eamon, Pete, David Wootton and Stefania Tutino for their careful reading of the result and their suggestions. None of the above, however, should be held responsible for any errors of commission or omission that remain. Finally, I am most grateful to Sarah Sheils for permitting use of the photo she took of John Bossy in the summer before he died.

Note on the author: Simon Ditchfield is Emeritus Professor of Early Modern History at the University of York.

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