The question of the relationship between ‘religion’ and ‘politics’, conceived of as separate spheres acting on one another like the gravitational pulls of passing planets, is at least as old as the discipline of history itself. Those – Marxist, Catholic, Protestant or republican secularist – who take a critical view of self-declaredly religious motivations have long emphasized the material impulses behind religious action. The political interests of popes, kings or elites, the state-like apparatus of the medieval church can be emphasized at the expense of their sacred character or the purity of their motives. The religious forms of medieval and early modern popular revolts can be portrayed as false consciousness masking the operations of class struggle. Such lines of argument can stray into a reductionism which is itself the object of robust criticism: wasn’t ‘religion’ important after all? But these responses also risk slipping into apologetic by maintaining the same division between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’, as if human actions could and can only be ‘about’ the one or the other, treated as discrete domains.

This conference was organised to bring together specialists in a variety of historical sub-disciplines, both sides of the divide between medieval and early modern, who construct their analyses neither in purely ‘religious’ or ‘political’ domains but in phenomena – social mechanisms, structures of ideas, institutional practices – which lie in the intersection (to change the metaphor) between the two. The aim was to encourage a fruitful interaction between scholars who would not normally encounter one another, in a workshop environment strengthened by the involvement of postgraduate students.

Dr John Arnold (Birkbeck College, London) began by considering how those who have dealt with popular revolt have tended to minimize the religious aspects of social movements which occur after the Black Death, and to dismiss movements (with perhaps a greater religious inflection) which took place before the fourteenth century. He considered how elements coded as religious could in fact prove more complex. Focusing on the late thirteenth-century revolt of the Capuciani, he discussed how religious practices shaped such movements, tied in with established practices such as large scale pilgrimage, to provide the building blocks of revolt in a way not dissimilar from sixteenth-century rebellions. He emphasized, in a theme that would re-emerge in the course of the conference, how the analysis of such events ought to focus on religion as a set of practices.

Dr Nathalie Mears (University of Durham) followed this paper by a consideration of how the circulation by the Elizabethan government of prayer books to report and shape public reaction to particular events (especially religious wars on the continent and Catholic plots at home) formed a part of the ‘public sphere’ of sixteenth century England. She considered not only how such devices could be used to relay news to the parishes, but also how parishioners, no passive vehicles for information, could take such service books as starting points for debate.

After tea, Dr James Clark (University of Bristol) presented a detailed section of his work on the local reaction to the Dissolution of the monasteries in England. He noted that, by the end of the fifteenth century, many monasteries had moved from a situation of confrontation with
local elites (characteristic of the fourteenth century) to one of mutual interdependence. At the
time of the Dissolution, Dr Clark’s research has revealed a phenomenon whereby local elites
divided the property of monasteries amongst themselves, such that when the royal
commissioners arrived, there was in effect no monastery to dissolve. Dr Clark used this to
argue a radical new line to explain why there was little resistance to the Dissolution: in short,
the monasteries, and their middle-ranking local supporters, thought they had won.

Dr Michael Questier (Queen Mary, University of London) followed this paper with a re-
analysis of contemporary debates concerning the Jacobean oath of allegiance (1606). He
stressed the dangerous nature of this oath, and the cleverness with which it was constructed in
such as way as to make its acceptance unambiguously unacceptable to the pope. He examined
how English Catholics attempted to steer a difficult middle way between the demands of pope
and king, underlining their political loyalty to the Crown, whilst seeking ways to accept,
refuse or avoid James’ Oath.

The first day’s questions and discussions brought up a number of issues which were to recur
throughout the conference. How far did actors make a distinction between ‘religious’ and
‘political’ actions? Were they conscious of moving from one domain to another? Is it possible
to speak of ‘conscience’, in the sense of personal, private determinations concerning the
nature of true religious doctrine, before the multiplication of confessional choices presented
by the Reformation?

Dr Mishtooni Bose (Christ Church, Oxford) opened the second day with an examination of
the reformist impulses of Thomas Gascoigne, a theologian who was Chancellor of Oxford
twice in the mid-fifteenth century and chaplain to Henry VI. Dr Bose explored how
Gascoigne’s theological material, dismissed by nineteenth-century editors, is in fact
inseparable from his political concerns. Gascoigne’s attacks on bishops (their worldly
concerns; their failure to attend to pastoral care and preaching) puts him in a long tradition of
critique of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This tradition includes not only Lollard attacks, but
also the sermons of a reforming but anti-Wycliffite bishop such as Thomas Brinton of
Rochester (1373-89). Casting himself as Isaiah or Jeremiah, Gascoigne both portrayed
himself as excluded from the ecclesiastical establishment, and gave himself a platform from
which to promote his views.

After coffee, Dr John Watts (Corpus Christi College, Oxford) presented a fresh examination
of how helpful it could be to consider the medieval Church as a polity, as part of a survey
project on late medieval politics in which he is currently engaged. Dr Watts considered how
the experience of the Church in this period compares with the experiences of other polities.
R.W. Southern thought of the Church’s experience of this period as one of decline, in which it
found itself increasingly threatened by the expansion of competing States. Watts argued that,
on the contrary, the polities of this period were generally engaged in a complex and multi-
centred search for identity and authority, in which the copious mechanisms for co-ordination
and expression had both clarifying and disruptive effects, and which find close analogies in
the search of the Roman church for legitimacy, through succession crises, Schism and
conciliarism.

In the final paper, Professor Peter Biller (University of York) took on the difficult problem of
addressing how far it is possible to discover the ‘political thought’ of Cathar and Waldensian
heretics – what ideas, that is, they had regarding the secular power. For the most part, the only
sources which exist for such an inquiry are the polemics of their Catholic opponents. These
are not concerned to accurately portray the heretics’ views, but rather to condemn them by the supposed consequences of their core beliefs. Outside such tendentious accounts, however, it seems that for these heretical groups abstract questions of the problem of rule were less significant than the problem of being obliged to live under the rule of Catholics.

After lunch, the central questions and common analytical problems of the conference were considered in a round table discussion. Concerns raised included:

How far ought we to separate out religious (or political) ‘thought’ as a separate moment from practice? Would it be better to talk in terms of embedded practices (liturgical, institutional, judicial, customary, linguistic) which it is (perhaps) a matter of little importance to label as ‘religious’ or ‘political’?

How far do we risk de-sacralizing religious practices by discussing them in these terms? Was there something fundamentally different about receiving news, for example, from the pulpit rather than in the ale house? Does treating the Church as a polity excessively diminish the sacred aspects of its character when seen by contemporaries? Or is it not equally significant to stress the sacred aspects of royal, princely and even civic government?

How do we deal with the problem of ‘chicken and egg’ when dealing with disputes which have a simultaneously religious and political character – such as the use by German towns in the Reformation of the argument that resistance to a Catholic emperor constituted legitimate resistance to a tyrant? ‘Mirrors for princes’ works from John of Salisbury to Giles of Rome asserted that the aim of the polity was the common good, and that the common good was salvation. Tyrants were those who threatened the common good and (thus) salvation. Yet, the equation between the common good and salvation is often left out of these texts when adapted in (for example) into English in the fifteenth century. What significance did these passages have?

Does the religious stand out clearly at certain moments – such as in Bohemia in 1415 – when apocalyptic themes seem appropriate in a context of war, collapse of order and religious repression? Are such moments any more ‘sacred’ than regular religious practices? Are Lent and Holy Week any less sacred for coming up once a year?

How did individuals conceive of their stake in the Church and in a nation? How did this change after the Reformation opened up the available choices? Might this be usefully compared to the experiences of kingdoms (such as the Anglo-Saxon realms) during earlier periods of conversion in which many confessional choices remained open?

After discussion of these and other themes, the round-table broke up into informal discussion over tea.

Chris Fletcher, 24 April 2006