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Heresy and Popular Protestantism in England, 1527-1553

[William Saffady, Wayne State College](#)

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Abstract
Recent scholarship has devoted comparatively little attention to the popular aspects of the English Reformation, despite an increasing appreciation of the role and importance of sectarian religious groups in sixteenth century life. Much work has been done on the nature and scope of non-magisterial Protestantism on the continent, the so-called "Radical Reformation", but these studies have largely ignored the presence in England of a contemporary movement to restore primitive Christianity together with an ethical religion based on Scripture. There was a deep current of what might be called "Protestant" feeling in England that had little to do with either the Henrician Reformation or the doctrinal changes enacted by Somerset or Northumberland. This current had its roots in the later Middle Ages but was not without certain affinities with continental Anabaptists and Lutheranism. Unfortunately, recent studies have largely ignored the beliefs of ordinary people despite the fact that an examination of available sources reveals much about the nature of this popular Protestant thought as well as the extent of its debt to medieval heretical activity and its relationship to its continental counterparts. No comprehensive account of the spread of Protestant ideas is available and this will certainly not be one. It is an examination of some of the salient characteristics of sixteenth century English heresy and attempts to give some insight into the things that ordinary people believed.

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Also, though one should not have to clarify this, in these days of "ecumeni-speak" and "political correctness" I felt it was important to say that at times it is entirely proper and necessary to call a person's beliefs "heretical." When spoken in love this constitutes an act of love. We are to hate the poison of heresy, but to love and have compassion for those infected by it. For more on this I highly recommend the essay entitled "The True Nature of Heresy" and this excerpt from a forthcoming book: *The Use of the Term "Heretic."* I also of This resulted in leading Protestants being tried for heresy, being found guilty and executed. The first burning at the stake took place on February 4th 1555. Many in England did not support the execution of men who were thought of as learned and not a threat to social stability. An obvious comparison was made with the England of Edward VI when Catholics may have been removed from religious office, but were not persecuted for their beliefs. The speed with which England returned to Protestantism under Elizabeth I would indicate that though legislation was on paper, their impact in the community was not great. Research at a local level also shows that the authorities introduced Mary's reforms at a local level. However, it can be argued that they had to. Recommended Citation. Saffady, William, "Heresy and Popular Protestantism in England, 1527-1553" (1971). Wayne State University Dissertations. Paper 951. This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. Although "Protestant" seems appropriate today, it was unknown in sixteenth century England where the term "heretic" was freely applied to any form of religious deviation. Finally, since popular. Protestant ideas spread among ordinary people all too often over-looked in an age of socio-economic analysis, I have included proper names whenever possible.