

# Professor John Bossy FBA (1933–2015)

Lucy Wooding

*Department of History, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS,  
UK. Email: lucy.wooding@kcl.ac.uk*

Professor John Bossy died on 23 October 2015, and the historical world lost a truly original thinker. Many in the profession have already paid tribute to a much-loved colleague, tutor, mentor and friend, but his particular contribution to the history of Catholicism deserves especial mention. The very first issue of *British Catholic History*, the reconfigured *Recusant History*, contained his preface, fifty-six years after he had first contributed to the journal.<sup>1</sup> It is only fitting that this journal should now acknowledge his lifetime's contribution to the field. Bossy has bequeathed an important legacy to all those who work on the history of Catholicism in particular, the history of the Reformation more generally, and the history of religion in its broadest sense. The clarity and creativity of his historical understanding transcended many outworn assumptions during his lifetime and remains startlingly contemporary for historians of religion today.

Bossy's work on early modern Catholicism demonstrated the application of some of the most modern and exciting approaches of twentieth-century scholarship to one of the more antiquated and intractable branches of English history. It was evident from the start that he had an unusual capacity for sloughing off the weight of established wisdom and making a fresh and clear-sighted evaluation of any historical problem. The man who was famously to reclassify English Catholicism as a Nonconformist sect was himself an historical free-thinker. It was not just that he brought the theories of sociologists, anthropologists and the Annales school to bear on a subject still wreathed in both pious and academic cobwebs, although this in itself was of enormous benefit to the field. It was that he began from a different place and asked different questions. This is why, when others were still writing church history, Bossy from the first wrote the history of religion.

English Catholicism was an area of historical study still bedevilled by caricatures set in place by Elizabethan propagandists and carrying the heavy burden of much confessionalized rhetoric. Bossy never felt the need to follow in anybody else's footsteps, however, despite being able to recognize most of them with ease. *The English Catholic*

<sup>1</sup> 'Recusant history and after', *British Catholic History* 32 (2015): 271–279.

*Community, 1570–1850*, published in 1975 is still required reading for anyone researching the religious history of these years. It shook the foundations of some deeply-entrenched beliefs about religious identity and periodization. Catholicism was here defined not in terms of authority or doctrine, but in terms of communities and practices, relationships and networks. At the same time, the scope of the book crossed not one but several chronological boundaries. Bossy might be said to have invented ‘the Long Reformation’ long before it became fashionable in the 1990s. He argued that post-Reformation English Catholicism became ‘a branch of the English nonconforming tradition’, conceiving it as in large part created by the missionary priests who arrived in England from the 1570s onwards, a community both fervent and distinct, which was involved in the slow process of separation, ‘a severance of bonds of collective behaviour which would once have united them to other Englishmen’.<sup>2</sup> It was a book about Catholics, but its stated aim was to contribute to ‘the synthetic view of English religious experience since the Reformation’, to explore separation in the context of society, and faith as rooted in community.<sup>3</sup> Many of his conclusions in this work have been superseded, but the insistence on ‘behaviour rather than belief’, and his attempt ‘to write the history of the community as a community’ pointed the way to a different way of writing religious history.<sup>4</sup>

Catholic identity poses many problems to historians, who often take cover under easy notions of change or continuity, theological definition or patterns of ritual. Bossy was from the first able to appreciate how Catholicism contained a blend of all such elements, in evolving and revolving proportions. He wrote social history that was both theologically adept and politically alert, and this unusual combination brought the subject to life as never before. This often came through in the smallest of details. The encounter between clergy and laity and the significance of fasting in eighteenth-century Catholic identity comes to us via Lady Molyneux, who ‘while roasting chicken for dinner at eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, was told that she was not entitled to eat it, and forced to change to red-herring’.<sup>5</sup> Characterizing post-Reformation ideas of sanctity he noted how the ‘large gestures of the baroque saint were made towards an audience of thousands, not to the kneeling donor or the old woman lighting her candle’.<sup>6</sup> It was Bossy who registered ‘the coming of the fork as an event in the history of Christianity’, when a painting by Veronese of

<sup>2</sup> *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975), 7, 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>5</sup> *English Catholic Community*, 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 96–7.

the Last Supper had to be demoted in part because of the apostle who held a fork and thereby offended against the central principle of communion as communal.<sup>7</sup> These were the details which helped fix the bigger picture, just as changing notions of penance, and the move from the collective to the individual were symbolized by the confessional box.<sup>8</sup>

Bossy was also a historian of the Reformation, but almost accidentally, since he seems to have written about it on the way to discovering something more interesting. The debate over the origins of the Reformation was of far less interest to him than the broader experience of religious life; he would rather know what the Reformation felt like than where it came from. Many historians have worked through the various aspects of Protestant and Catholic thought and culture in this era to arrive at a realization of how much these different communities and identities had in common. Bossy seems to have known this from the start, but then he had a different starting point to most. At a time when the standard approach to the Reformation was to begin with the ideas of the different reformers, or the views of the different churches, Bossy emphatically sought out the religion of ordinary people, from the first deeply appreciative of all those scholars who ‘strove to bring to light the staple of any religious community, the congregation’.<sup>9</sup> He was dissatisfied with the very term ‘Reformation’ itself, which he thought was not much use, ‘since it is too high-flown to cope with actual social behaviour, and not high-flown enough to deal sensitively with thought, feeling, or culture’.<sup>10</sup> His own approach to the years of Reformation was to prove unexpected, innovative, humane and brilliant.

*Christianity in the West, 1400–1700*, published in 1985, was Bossy’s masterpiece. Re-reading it today, it is striking how many current debates it anticipates. On the relationship between word and image, the significance of the ‘radical’ Reformation, or the role of music, Bossy’s observations are startlingly prescient. He roamed the theological, literary, political and social landscapes of the three centuries in question with an insider’s ease and an outsider’s powers of observation. The book put the concept of ‘traditional religion’ on the map, and so revitalized the study of late medieval Christianity, but it also reconfigured notions of Catholic identity. A central theme was that of family, the role of kith and kin in sustaining religious communities, the focus on the Holy Family and the saints at the heart of traditional belief, but also the conception of Reformation struggles as a family quarrel involving ‘the instant dissolution of the multitude

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>8</sup> ‘The Social History of Confession in the Age of Reformation’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (hereafter *TRHS*) 25 (1975): 21–38.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Recusant history and after’: 273.

<sup>10</sup> *Christianity in the West*, 91.

of relationships tradition had fostered', with all its implications for early modern society.<sup>11</sup> What others might class more prosaically as tension between church and state was for Bossy best seen as a divorce between the sacred and the social body.

*Christianity in the West* gave a dizzying perspective on the Reformation. It could be said to have proposed a kind of revisionism, in that it gave an exceptional portrayal of the strengths of late medieval Christianity. These were not institutional strengths so much as the powerful communal worth of a creed which had practical experience of knotting together the social fabric. Bossy's pre-Reformation churches were not a vision of parish harmony so much as the focus of a hard-won and precarious peace which had constantly to be renegotiated. His vision of the Mass was less transcendent than sociable, memorably described as 'a cult of living friends in the service of dead ones'.<sup>12</sup> In his discussion of the rites of marriage, he reminded us of the very real possibility 'that the process might misfire and end in a bloodbath'.<sup>13</sup> This was no rose-tinted, bloodless view of religious sentiment at work, but a profound and earthy understanding of how belief, ritual and tradition intersected with human affections and antagonisms.

Bossy understood that the Reformation 'demolished at a stroke whole wings of the edifice of contemporary piety'.<sup>14</sup> Yet he did not stop to lament this so much as to understand what had happened next. In particular, he saw Catholicism and Protestantism responding to the same stimuli, equally taking refuge in the institutional or pedagogic response, which he acknowledged as full of 'talent and imagination', but also saw as 'reducing Christianity to whatever could be taught and learnt'.<sup>15</sup> If post-Reformation religion relied heavily on catechisms, this was as true for Canisius as for Calvin.<sup>16</sup> Bookish piety, so long associated with Protestantism, was perhaps more likely to characterize 'devout sixteenth-century Catholics, reading spiritual books in their pews and closets' than 'the ranks of the reformed'. In the end, Bossy thought that perhaps 'typography caught up with them all, imposing a Christianity of the text' which few save Tyndale had really wanted.<sup>17</sup> There were no winners and losers in his vision of the Reformation, save those who managed best to preserve the communal, charitable and reconciliatory capacity of Christian tradition, and here Italian

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 97

<sup>12</sup> 'The Mass as a Social Institution', *Past and Present* 100 (1983): 42. This article was first published as 'Essai de sociographie de la messe, 1200–1700', *Annales. E.S.C.*, 36 (1981): 44–70.

<sup>13</sup> *Christianity in the West*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Catholics kept company with English Protestants, and the eloquence of John Calvin and Edmund Campion was set side by side.<sup>18</sup>

Bossy's ability to move easily between confessions was a strength long before it had become fashionable to acknowledge the middle ground. He clearly felt sympathy for those who defied easy categorization and followed their own convictions. Bernard Gilpin, the 'learned traditionalist who objected impartially to transubstantiation and the Genevan discipline as jumped-up inventions' was apparently the figure 'whose doings as a peacemaker in the Northumbrian badlands first introduced me to the subject'.<sup>19</sup> Similar preoccupations inspired his long interest in Henry Howard, that 'most eminent' of church papists, the poet's son and traitor's brother, who defended the Elizabethan regime in conservative terms, held neither with justification by faith alone nor with papal authority, and used Elizabeth I's chapel as 'the parish church to which, we are told, he went when she was looking'.<sup>20</sup> He liked eccentrics, like the Benedictine Ambrose Barlow, executed in 1641, who 'had chosen to live in a farmhouse, not with the gentry; his mode of life was demotic, some said clownish, going about in slippers and a floppy hat; he had 'a great talent', we are told, in peace-making, and his Easter communions were feasts of hospitality'.<sup>21</sup> His ability to evaluate the human value of religion, and the human cost of religious change, was surely rooted in his astute and compassionate understanding of human nature.

The range and depth of John Bossy's intellectual influence goes far beyond the particular study of Catholicism or the Reformation and it may be that his most lasting legacy will be the way in which his thought shaped the history of religion in its broadest sense. He wanted to understand, not the Church (or churches) but 'a body of people' and 'the features of Christian belief which seemed most relevant to them'.<sup>22</sup> Bossy understood 'lived religion', and was able to balance the contrasting elements of religious zeal, social propriety, family tension, communal tradition and political aspiration to give a rounded account of religion within society that has seldom been equalled. In particular, he was preoccupied with what he termed the 'moral tradition'. As he defined it in his Birkbeck lectures in 1995, this had three aspects. It comprised '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

<sup>18</sup> *Peace in the Post-Reformation* Birkbeck Lectures 1995 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); *Christianity in the West*, 102.

<sup>19</sup> *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, 76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> *Christianity in the West*, vii.

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'. This was a concept which had been apparent in some of Bossy's earliest work, but found its fullest exposition in his *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, the expanded version of the 1995 Birkbeck lectures. In an assertion which was pragmatic more than eirenic, he stated that 'I do not see any of the branches of the western church as they emerged after the Reformation as having a special claim to be the vehicle of my moral tradition'.<sup>23</sup> An exploration of the consequences of Reformation in Italy, France, Germany and England followed. His conclusion was that the destructive effect of the Reformation 'was temporary, and as things settled down the moral tradition ... re-emerged vigorously, like the return of the repressed. We can say rather firmly that the repression was as much part of the Catholic story as of the Protestant, and the return perhaps more vigorous among Protestants than among Catholics'.<sup>24</sup> Whatever the rights and wrongs of the individual case studies, Bossy had effectively established a new set of criteria for the historical evaluation of religion.

Bossy was convinced 'that words matter; that without a sense of their history they become manipulable in the cause of obfuscation', and in particular he felt that 'society' and 'religion' were in need of more careful understanding.<sup>25</sup> This was the subject of his inaugural lecture as professor at the University of York, in which he brought Durkheim to bear on the religious travails of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At its heart was the preoccupation with 'a Christian relationship of mutual participation', whether encapsulated in John Foxe's notion of the Eucharist or Bossuet's understanding of prayer to the saints. The evolving meaning of 'society', which Bossy saw as following the meaning of 'religion', pointed the way to the wider problem, of how traditional worship gave way to a plurality of contested faiths and then moved on 'to an abstractable essence of them'.<sup>26</sup> The recalibration of 'charity' from 'the state of Christian love' and a body of people seeking 'to embody that state' to 'an act of benevolence' or 'an institution erected as a result of such an act' was another key preoccupation.<sup>27</sup> These were significant illustrations of a broader 'migration of the holy', and the shift within Western Christianity from defining religion in terms of a body of people to seeing it as a body of beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

In much of his published work, Bossy's erudition seems almost casual, and his prose was often chatty and colloquial; in an age which

<sup>23</sup> *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, 2–3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *Past and Present* 95 (1982): 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Christianity in the West*, 168.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

is both more pretentious and more timid, 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. *Peace in the Post-Reformation* finished by suggesting several possible conclusions, calmly discussing the likelihood of each. Yet it also, without fanfare, advanced a broad and bold analysis of the Reformation and its aftermath which seems almost inadvertent in its profundity. He frequently poked fun at himself, cheerfully admitting his deployment of ‘the vulgar pertinacity inseparable from largish projects’.<sup>29</sup> He could mockingly classify his own works with those which fell ‘into a familiar class of historical or sociological lines which state that at some time we were all one, and somehow or other, as by Italian despotism, the Reformation, bureaucracy, the rise of capitalism or the advent of Mrs Thatcher, became separated out into atomic individuals’.<sup>30</sup> Having followed the development of the ‘moral tradition’ throughout the early modern period, he ended by speculating about its eventual demise within ‘civil society’, but warned of the need to be careful here: ‘no one will wish to be caught dating the death of God to the diffusion of the fire-engine’.<sup>31</sup> Seldom can such scholarship have been advanced with so little academic pomposity.

There remains much in Bossy’s work which can be criticized or countered. He had the great and simple virtue of conceiving strong opinions and stating them without embarrassment or defensiveness, a virtue which is all the more rare in these days of official oversight, and academic nervousness. The breadth and depth of his work was such that it left plenty of scope for argument; he was quirky, unpredictable and occasionally opaque. Yet even where his conclusions have been challenged by more recent research, the significance of the different pathways which he chose to take into the history of religion remains hugely important. If his picture of seigneurial Catholicism has now been qualified, his idea that Catholics should be defined by their community more than their dogma is still central. If his suggestion that English Catholicism was forged anew in the 1570s has been undermined by the many different works which demonstrate the continuities with the pre-Reformation church, his notion of the English Catholic Community as a nonconformist entity between 1568 and 1850 is still both insightful and stimulating. Above all, his appreciation of religion as inhabiting ‘a familiar social universe, but transfigured into friendship with God and with man’, remains an inspiration. For Bossy, what was important was ‘a sense of the Church

<sup>29</sup> *English Catholic Community*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Prayers’, *TRHS* I (1991): 137. Bossy was here commenting on the work of Gregory Dix.

<sup>31</sup> *Peace in the Post-Reformation*, 100.

as *communitas*, a feeling for the sacraments as social institutions, or simply the love of one's neighbour'.<sup>32</sup>

John Bossy will be remembered with affection and gratitude by his colleagues, friends and students. His work will remain both provocative and inspirational, and its influence looks set to prove more lasting than most. At a time when religious identity is such an important and contentious subject, when the complexities of both religious zeal and religious conformity are such a troubling proposition, his work holds out a clear-sighted evaluation of how convictions are made manifest within the social order. It would not, perhaps, have displeased him to think that we might also draw from his work a more hopeful vision of the place of reconciliation within the constructs of faith and society.

<sup>32</sup> *Christianity in the West*, 120.