Sincere Lies and Creative Truth:  
Recantation Strategies during the English Reformation

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When necessary, some sixteenth-century reformers would lie in order to uphold the truth. Specifically, they would recant their religious beliefs when faced with hostility from the crown or the church. It is easy to assume that those who recanted simply failed in their faith, but in certain circumstances it was actually considered morally acceptable to recant, and indeed admirable. This paper will argue that some reformers’ recantations did not reflect real rejection of their beliefs, but a form of resistance to doctrines with which they did not agree. Through their submission to authority, they could successfully subvert authority.

Such an approach to recantation fills a gap in sixteenth-century reformation historiography. Many historians focus on the martyrs, the recusants and the exiles of the sixteenth century. Although all three of these groups, in both major confessions, contain people who recanted, few historians consider recantation in their works. If recantation is mentioned, it is often accompanied by the implication that the recantation was a shameful act of cowardice, or a minor incident in the life of a martyr and a potential destroyer of his or her reputation. Peter Marshall mentions it as an impediment in the career of Thomas Bilney.1 Eamon Duffy, in his Fires of Faith, suggests that only the weak recanted, and continued to recant until they were bolstered into accepting martyrdom by a fear of hellfire.2 Sarah Covington, in her The Trail of Martyrdom, considers recantation a small part of the ‘evasive world’ of religious upheaval, an inevitable side effect of constantly changing definitions, authorities and values.3 In Charitable Hatred, Alexandra Walsham considers recantation as just one of many forms of religious vacillation that occurred in the sixteenth century.4 None of these, or indeed similar works, analyze the full range of possible reasons to recant, or look at the methodology of recantation. Nor do they examine in detail the interplay between crown and reformer during the process of recantation, which could be as useful as the study of scaffold speeches has proven to be.5

This leaves a blank page in the history of religious persecution and tolerance in sixteenth-century England. This paper hopes to contribute to some recent studies which are attempting to fill it, such as those of Susan Wabuda and Brad Gregory. These historians both suggest that the crown did not press for recantation only to maintain power. Wabuda notes that the crown used

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5 See, for example, K. Kesselring’s Mercy and Authority in the Tudor State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
recantations to show what was and was not current religious policy. Gregory studies the way that recantation was used to reclaim heretics from the danger of hellfire. Similarly, this paper intends to look at the purposes of recantation, but through the point of view of the reformers instead of the authorities. The reformers in this study used recantation to work around the crown’s expectations and fulfill their own goals. Recanting allowed them to maintain their salvation, to fulfill their duty of obedience to the sovereign without compromising their religion, to obey their personal conscience, and to promote their own faith. They had to develop means of skillful truth-telling, which required a certain amount of creativity and often caused the lines between truth and lies to slide subtly out of focus.

This led to a form of subversion that is similar to the ‘ordinary resistance’ described in James Scott’s Weapons of the Weak. The peasants of Scott’s study employed such strategies as feigning ignorance and evading the authorities either physically or verbally. Many sixteenth-century reformers used the same strategies, but where Scott’s peasants subverted authority for reasons of economics or power, these reformers subverted authority as a reflection of passionate and personal religious conviction, mingled with a sense of civic responsibility. This can be seen more and more clearly as the sixteenth century progressed. The early Lollards almost all submitted fully, rarely making much of an attempt to sidestep or resist authority. They did not develop distinct methods to manipulate truth in order to simultaneously obey God and king. Reformers during the reign of Henry VIII, particularly William Tyndale and Thomas More, studied what constituted lies in order to try to reconcile conscience and the duty of obedience. This developed into more detailed studies of resistance theory during the Marian exile. Then, during the era of recusancy and Catholic missions in later Elizabethan England, the methods of creative truth employed at the beginning of the century contributed to the development of casuistry.

The time period for this paper will extend from the reign of Henry VIII through to the beginning of Mary’s reign. Due to the constraints of space and time, Marian resistance theory will not come into the discussion. Also, casuistry will not be fully treated because it was a different means of creative truth, one which employed different strategies from those currently under discussion, and took place in a very different historical context. This paper will contribute to a study of recantation which will be useful to the understanding of the culture of persecution and martyrdom that developed in sixteenth-century England. It will examine the definition of lying and how it could be manipulated, and how reformers employed strategies of creative truth in order to reconcile their religious beliefs with their social and political obligations.

Recantation

Recantation involved revoking religious ideas once held, by making a public confession in the form of published statements, acts of penance, or public shame. It was designed to humiliate and subdue the people who were recanting, to bring them firmly back into the fold of spiritual and temporal authority, and to prevent others from following their example. However, the process of

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9 Gregory, Salvation at Stake, p. 70.
recantation could be manipulated in such a way that it had the opposite effect. As Susan Wabuda states, ‘persecuted reformers found other ways to testify to what they saw as the truth …[and] used recantation as an opportunity to proclaim and affirm their faith’. This can be seen in the story of Thomas Becon, a popular reformer who wrote many of the most influential tracts of the day. Becon recanted twice during the reign of Henry VIII, and yet still managed to maintain his reputation as a reformer. This may have been due to an understanding between him and his audience. As Susan Bridgen phrases it, Becon could cheerfully recant and then return to work because his recantation ‘was feigned and recognized as such by all who heard it’. Instead of discrediting him, recantation provided him with wider influence, for he summarized his offending works in his recantations, and that raised public awareness of their contents. Essentially, Becon deliberately subverted authority through his recantation, using it as an opportunity to affirm, not betray, his beliefs.

Thomas Cranmer attempted the same strategy. It is often said that Cranmer recanted six times before he dramatically rejected his recantation at his execution, but it would be more accurate to say that he made every effort not to recant six times before his dramatic rejection of his recantation. John Strype said that Cranmer ‘thought to pen [his first recantation] so favourably and dexterously for himself, that he might evade both the danger from the state, and the danger of his conscience too’, a claim that is supported by the text of that first recantation.

For as much as the King’s and Queen’s majesties, by consent of Their Parliament, have received the pope’s authority within this realm, I am content to submit myself to their laws herein, and to take the pope for chief head of this church of England, so far as God’s laws, and the laws and customs of this realm will permit.

What constituted God’s laws was not defined, and the limitations created by saying ‘as far as the laws and customs of this realm will permit’ allowed Cranmer to maintain his beliefs, which is the opposite to a recantation of belief. At the same time, taken at face value, it could be interpreted to mean that Cranmer recanted, accepted papal authority and submitted himself to the restoration of the Catholic faith. Unsurprisingly, neither Mary nor Philip took it in that sense, however, and the recantation was not accepted. In his second effort, Cranmer submitted himself to the Catholic Church of Christ, ‘and unto the pope, supreme head of the same church, and to the king’s and queen’s majesties, and unto all their laws and ordinances’. This is a good example of subversion through creative truth. Submission to the church and the law did not necessarily mean belief in the church and the law, nor did it deny Cranmer’s former beliefs.

Cranmer’s third recantation saw him attempt to reconcile the weakness noted above, while still not denying his faith.

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15 Ibid., p. 233.
I am content to submit myself to the King's and Queen's majesties, and to all their laws and ordinances, as well concerning the pope's supremacy, as others. And I shall from time to time, move and stir all others to do the like to the uttermost of my power; and to live in quietness and obedience unto their majesties, most humbly without murmur, or grudging against any of their godly proceedings. And for my book which I have written, I am content to submit me to the judgement of the Catholic church, and of the next general council.16

This hinted at a retraction of his book, though not until the next general council and only if it told him to do so, and suggested that he would preach in a manner that followed royal religious policy. It still limited his obedience to only godly proceedings, however, and showed a remarkable lack of enthusiasm. Not surprisingly, this was not acceptable in the eyes of queen and council either. Cranmer tried again. In his fourth recantation he began to claim that his beliefs had changed and to retract certain unpopular statements, but it still took two more drafts before his recantation was accepted. His sixth recantation included not only acknowledgement of heretical beliefs but also a condemnation of himself as a ‘persecutor, a blasphemer, [and] a mischief-maker’. Strype claims that this sixth recantation put words in Cranmer’s mouth, and then notes with admiration how Cranmer’s last-minute rejection of the recantation in public and his dramatic death scene gave his enemies ‘a notable disappointment’.17 As in the case of Thomas Becon, recantation was used for subversion - although in this case it was a recantation of a recantation.

Not all subversion through recantation was staged in such a public forum. Often, reformers managed to employ strategies of creative truth in their recantations before they came to the point of public display. The next sections will examine these strategies, and the definitions of truth and lies that gave them their foundations.

Re-Defining Lies

As Nicholas Ridley once said to Thomas Cranmer, heretics in early modern England had the choice to ‘turn or burn’;18 they could recant or die at the stake. However, men such as Thomas Bilney, James Bainham, John Tewkesbury, Hugh Latimer and Robert Barnes chose to do both. All died as martyrs, and all recanted at least once during their lives. Some of these men suffered agonies of guilt after their recantations. They believed that by recanting they had either denied their beliefs or they had sinned by lying, based on St. Augustine’s definition of a lie: ‘a false statement made with the intention to deceive’.19 Others felt no guilt at all, possibly because they believed that in some situations it was morally acceptable to lie or equivocate, or because they considered the motivation to deceive the most important part of the definition of a lie. If the motivation to deceive was what truly changed truth into a lie, their own reasoning could become an important element in dividing truth from falsehood.

16 Ibid., p. 234.
17 Ibid., p. 232.
In sixteenth-century England, people who managed to confuse or thwart their persecutors through various methods of creative truth were often praised for their ability rather than condemned for their recourse to dishonesty. Anthony Dalaber, George Joye, John Frith and John Careless all wrote against lying and deceitfulness, and yet they all displayed behaviour that seems to contradict their writings. In 1526, Robert Garrett heard that he was about to be arrested. His friend Anthony Dalaber sent him off to be a curate for his brother, under a false name and false papers. For some reason, Garrett returned, and Dalaber disguised him and sent him off again, this time to escape the country. Garrett was taken, and Dalaber was called in for questioning. He lied about when he had seen Garrett, what Garrett had said, and where he had gone. Even when a witness was called in to challenge what Dalaber said, he maintained his lie, gambling that the authorities were more likely to believe him than the witness, who was a young boy.20

In 1527, Wolsey’s representatives accused George Joye of sharing the heretical views of Thomas Bilney and Thomas Arthur.21 Joye was called in for examination, but when he arrived at the palace he was told his questioning had been delayed. The scribe tried to find out where Joye lived so that he could be found for examination on another day. Joye, as he later told John Ashwell, told the scribe ‘a lie for his asking’,22 and fled the country. John Frith used a similar strategy in his escape attempt. In 1533, when pursued by royal authorities, Frith disguised himself as a common man and fled. He was captured in Reading and examined. Foxe relates that Frith ‘pretended unto the magistrates that he was not the man, but another person’.23

John Careless also lied to crown authorities and his lie was bolder than those of either Joye or Frith. In 1556, Dr. Martin examined Careless about his writings and those of some other accused heretics, including a Mr. Henry Hart. Martin asked Careless if he knew Hart, and Careless responded that he did not. However, he did. In his record of the event, Careless later said that ‘I lied falsely, for I knew him indeed, and his qualities too well’.24

As S.R. Maitland has noted, these men talked about their lies with openness and did not seem ashamed or even embarrassed about them.25 Careless returned to prison after this examination: there, bothered by great ‘heaviness of mind and conscience’, he wrote to his friend John Philpot, looking for advice and consolation. The two men exchanged letters, and Careless confessed that he was ashamed of his reluctance to be in prison and the despair that imprisonment caused him. Philpot encouraged Careless, praised him for his godliness and admired Careless’s ‘manifest gifts of the Spirit’.26 Neither man seemed at all concerned about Careless’s lie to Martin. Nor do any of the other men who reported the lies of Frith, Dalaber and Joye seem concerned about the twisting of truth. Foxe reported Frith’s subterfuge with an equanimity that comes close to admiration, calling Frith ‘the simple man, which could not craftily

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24 Ibid., p. 1530.
26 Foxe (1563), pp. 1535-1537.
enough colour himself. Dalaber’s report of his lies showed only an attitude of determination and protectiveness toward Garrett, and a strong dislike of papists. Joye’s attitude was simply one of distrust toward the authorities.

These lies reveal a common purpose. Careless lied to defend the religious beliefs of himself and Hart, even though he did not agree with Hart. Joye and Frith lied to save their lives. Dalaber lied to save a friend’s life. None of these people lied because they took pleasure in deception; their intent was to prevent something. Deception could therefore be justified, and allow them to preach against lies even while they altered the truth. Blending the theories of many of the classical and medieval studies of truth and lies made this distinction possible. Varying conclusions in the writings of St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and other church fathers and medieval theologians provided room for interpretation, which sixteenth-century theologians and canonists used to develop a new system of moral theology. Two treatises of St. Augustine formed its foundation: On Lying, which provided the basic definition of a lie, and Against Lying, which applied the theories of the first treatise to the persecution of heretics.

Augustine claimed that there were no circumstances in which lying was not a sin, but that circumstances could influence the severity of the sin. In contrast, St. Jerome acknowledged some situations where lying might be acceptable, including lying in order to prevent something worse from happening, such as church dissention. Clement of Alexandria, Origen and John Chrysostom agreed with this, for to them lying was acceptable in situations where telling the truth might be harmful. Thomas Aquinas looked at the practical difficulties of truth-telling more closely in his Summa Theologica and provided further distinctions and qualifications, such as the idea that ‘truth is principally in the intellect, and secondarily in things according as they are related to the intellect as their principle’. This allowed for various definitions of truth based on the variables within human intellect. Aquinas also distinguished between truth and truthfulness. He called a person’s inclination to be truthful veracity, and considered veracity to be a virtue. As John Finnis summarizes, veracity was a matter of personal decency, honesty and uprightness, expressed through words or deeds that conformed to reality. Veracity did not require that all communicative expressions be true. In certain situations, it was acceptable to alter meaning or even lie.

Sixteenth-century theologians used all these writings to re-define the lie and its eternal consequences. Considering the variation of beliefs regarding other aspects of the faith that existed between these men, their definition of what constituted a lie was remarkably consistent. All of them hinged on the motivation of deception. Miles Coverdale said that to deceive through lies abused the name of God. In 1536, William Tyndale said that: ‘to lie for the intent to beguile is damnable of itself’. His great enemy, Thomas More, also emphasized that to deceive was the worst part of a lie, saying that to practise deception broke the seventh commandment: thou shalt

27 Ibid., p. 502.
31 W. Tyndale, An exposycyon vpon the v.vi.vii. chapters of Mathewe which thre chapters are the keye and the dore of the scrypture, and the restoring agayne of Moses lawe corrupt by ye scrybes and pharyses (London, 1536), p. F5v.
not steal.\textsuperscript{32} In the mid-1560s, Calvin defined a lie as: ‘to do deceitfully ...to fail and break promise’.\textsuperscript{33} All of these theologians condemned particular kinds of lies and allowed others, based on the intention to deceive. Justification based on motivation became a key factor. To deceive in order to accomplish something that was right became acceptable, though never ideal.

Calvin gave two examples of this, through the Biblical figures of Rahab and Rebecca. Rahab’s deception was acceptable because it was meant ‘to help our brethren, to provide for their safety’. Rebecca lied to enable God’s plan for her son Jacob. Both women showed faith in their deception, which provided a good motivation to lie.\textsuperscript{34} Thirty years earlier, Tyndale had used the same theory, although he gave as an example the story of King David deceiving King Achis the Philistine. Tyndale said that David was justified because he deceived Achis as part of his campaign against the Amalekites, who were enemies of the Jews. Tyndale considered deception acceptable for the sake of a higher purpose. As he said in his \textit{Exposition on Matthew}:

\begin{quote}
‘To bear a sick man in hand that a wholesome bitter medicine is sweet to make him drink it is the duty of charity and no sin. To persuade him that pursueth his neighbour to hurt him or slay him, that his neighbour is gone another contrary way, is the duty of every Christian man by the law of charity and no sin, no though I confirmed it with an oath. But to lie for to deceive and hurt, that is damnable only.’\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

Over the course of the sixteenth century, theologians developed degrees of culpability for lies, and justified these degrees through careful application and expansion of the theories of the church fathers and medieval theologians. A general structure came from St. Augustine, who arranged lies into what Vernon Bourke calls ‘eight levels of seriousness’, based on the amount of malice involved. Augustine placed lying to harm one’s neighbour or for the pleasure of deception at a high level because of the high amount of malice in those sorts of lies. The lowest three levels were ‘lying to improve the morals or social relations of one’s associates, lying to save someone’s life, and lying to save a person from sexual defilement’.\textsuperscript{36} These lies contained little malice. Thus, the motivation for the lie was the underlying factor that influenced the intent to deceive and so changed the level of seriousness.

For sixteenth-century theologians, blasphemy bespoke a high degree of culpability. Men who seemed unashamed of their own lies, in contrast, spoke vehemently against blasphemy, by which they meant swearing falsely in God’s name or teaching false doctrine. George Joye, in the same letter to John Ashwell in which he described how he lied to the scribe, also condemned people who lied about doctrine.\textsuperscript{37} Thomas Becon, who recanted twice, wrote \textit{An Invective Against that Most Wicked and Damnable Vice of Swearing}, which equated swearing falsely using God’s

\textsuperscript{32} T. More, \textit{A brief fourme of confession instructing all Christian folke how to confess their sinnes} (London, 1576), p. D1v.

\textsuperscript{33} J. Calvin, \textit{A commentarie of M. John Caluine, vpon the booke of Iosue finished a little before his death} (London: 1578), pp. D1r, D1v.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. C1r.

\textsuperscript{35} Tyndale, \textit{An Exposition on Matthew}, p. F7v.

\textsuperscript{36} V. J. Bourke, \textit{Augustine’s Love of Wisdom: An Introspective Philosophy}. (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1992), p. 188.

name with adultery, gluttony, fornication and covetousness. Martin Luther condemned the blasphemous lies of false teachers who advocated doctrine over faith. Tyndale said that a lie sworn to God dishonoured the name of God. Almost as bad as blasphemy was perjury; the two were connected because each involved swearing falsely using God’s name. As Calvin and More said, perjury broke both law and commandment, and so placed people under both human and divine judgement.

At the other end of the scale, little culpability was applied to lying to save a life. This can partly explain why so many men and women who risked martyrdom for their faith showed little shame or embarrassment about their lies. As Perez Zagorin has noted, this is a logical aspect of a persecuted community, for lying was for them a means of self-protection. Not only did such an argument justify the sort of lies told by Careless, Joye, Frith and Dalaber, it justified recanting to placate the authorities as well. In circumstances where recantation would not be blasphemy or perjury, people could recant in order to save lives – sometimes, their own. In some cases, their friends advised them to recant to save their own lives, even if they had to lie. Thomas Whyttell said when he signed his recantation that he had been ‘desired and counselled’ to do so. Friends of Robert Wisdom told him to recant, because they did not believe he could tolerate prison. According to Foxe, Thomas Bilney consulted his friends Master Dancaster and Master Farmer regarding his recantation in 1527, and recanted ‘through infirmity rather than [inclination]’, due to their persuasion. In 1531, James Bainham was arrested and put in prison and Hugh Latimer advised him to recant. Latimer had heard that Bainham had been arrested for discrediting Thomas Becket and wrote to him saying that it was not an issue worth dying for.

Subverting authority through recantation might also be justifiable to save a life. When Robert Barnes was arrested for heresy, his friends advised him to recant. He took their advice and then returned to his evangelism. He was soon re-arrested and the same friends suggested that he flee the country while he still could. He escaped from jail, leaving behind a note that said that he intended to commit suicide by drowning himself in the river because he had seen that Cardinal Wolsey was right and he was wrong. He wrote that he had tied a full recantation around his own neck and it could be retrieved when his body was found. Wolsey ordered a search to retrieve that recantation which lasted over a week, while Barnes fled to Antwerp unimpeded.

Some people believed that the state of the liar’s heart and mind also changed the degree of culpability in a lie, for if the lie came only from the mouth it was not as severe a sin. Gregory the Great, in his Moralia, said that Job was accused of lying because he claimed he was righteous in God’s sight, but he was not lying because God agreed with what Job said, even if Job’s friends did not. The ears of men judge our words as they sound outwardly, but the divine judgement hears

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38 T. Becon, An inuectyue agenst the moost wicked [and] detestable vyce of swearing (London, 1543), pp. 4-4v.
39 M. Luther, A faithful admonition of a cертeyne true pastor and prophete sent vnto the Germanes at such a time as certain great princes went about to bryng alienes into Germany (London, 1554), pp. G6r, G6v.
40 Tyndale, An Exposition on Matthew, pp. F5v.
41 J. Calvin, Sermons of M. Iohn Caluine, vpon the.X.Commandementes of the Lawe, geuen of God by Moses, otherwise called the Decalogue (London 1579), 23d; More, A Form of Confession, p. 22v.
42 Zagorin, Ways of Lying, p. V.
44 Susan Bridgen, London and the Reformation, p. 349.
them as they are uttered from within. Among men the heart is judged by the words; with God the
words are judged by the heart.’ This text, referred to in later discussions of the Moralia as
*humanae aures*, was an important development in the study of lies and the truth, for it allowed
what Zagorin calls the distinction of ‘heart from word and inner state from its outward
eexpression’.48

**Creative Truth**

This distinction allowed methods of creative truth to develop. This paper will call these methods
strategies of equivocation, although this term was not employed by the sixteenth-century
reformers who developed them. In both modern scholarship and sixteenth-century writings,
equivocation is often considered part of casuistry, but the two actually show distinct
characteristics. Casuistry justifies action based on probability, plays with the interpretation of the
truth and often denies the authority of the law. In contrast, equivocation justifies action based on
the particular situation, plays with the truthfulness of the individual, and works through the
authority of the law. For sixteenth-century reformers, equivocation was especially helpful in
situations where there was no obligation to tell the truth, and when the spirit of the law differed
from the letter of the law. It was a way to maintain one’s personal faith without open defiance.

Johann Sommerville uses the following example: a traveller comes to a city and the
guards ask him if he has come from a particular town where they think there is plague. The
traveller has come from that town, and knows that there is no plague. However, he is afraid that
the guards will not believe him and that they will not let him in if he says that he is from that
town. Also, their real question is not whether he is from that town but if he could be carrying the
plague. So he can answer their question in the negative because he is really answering their real
question, which is whether or not they are in danger from plague by letting him in.49

Some of the most common methods of equivocation used humour, non-answers, or the
ambiguity of language. These methods allowed people to safeguard their veracity, tell lies
without living lies, and subvert the laws and institutions of the authorities who opposed them
while they furthered their own causes. For example, records of the examinations of several
accused reformers show a frequent refrain of ‘I do not remember’, which might be legitimate or
might show the use of selective memory to avoid self-incrimination.50 Thomas Rose equivocated
many times when under examination by Bishop Gardiner, making statements that had many
possible meanings. He reported to Foxe that his final speech successfully convinced his
examiners to ‘name it a recantation, which I never meant nor thought, as God knoweth’, and saved
him from execution. Gardiner decided that he would take Rose with him on his visitations. Rose
agreed to go, then managed to escape and flee to the continent.51

Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
50 Strype *Ecclesiastical Memorials* Appendix vol 1, p. 42. See also Foxe (1563), pp. 244, 486, 566, 781, 808.
51 J. Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO* (1576 edition). Editorial commentary and
[Accessed: 12.03.11], p. 1980.
In 1529, after Sir Thomas More gave Bishop Tunstall the job of hunting book agents, Tunstall went after those who sold Tyndale’s New Testament. He planned to hold a public burning of the Bibles that he confiscated from them, but he did not manage to find as many copies as he wished. Augustine Packington offered to get Tunstall some Tyndale New Testaments to burn. Tunstall agreed, and actually paid for the books. Multiple copies of the New Testament duly arrived, and More demanded to know who had supported the importation of banned books. George Constantine truthfully told him that Tunstall had, while Packington gave Tyndale the money to pay for a fresh print run of the New Testament.\footnote{Bridgen, \textit{London and the Reformation}, p. 181.}

The foundation for the use of humour in equivocation may have been St. Augustine’s teaching that ‘jocose’ lies were not lies because, in theory, everyone was in on the joke.\footnote{Saint Augustine, ‘On Lying,’ p. 54.} William Jerome, Robert Garrett and Robert Barnes used humour when they recanted at Paul’s Cross with such light-heartedness and good cheer that witnesses to the event realized that they did not mean a word of it.\footnote{Bridgen, \textit{London and the Reformation}, pp. 311-312.} Anne Askew feigned concern over the fate of mice sent to damnation because they ate the Host.\footnote{Saint Augustine, ‘On Lying,’ p. 54.} A man named Silver once found himself under accusation of heresy by Sir Thomas More, and when More made a pun that silver needed to be refined by fire, Silver retorted: ‘But Quicksilver cannot stand for it’. According to John Strype, More was so delighted by such a ‘ready answer’ that he dismissed him.\footnote{Strype, \textit{Ecclesiastical Memorials} vol 1, p. 387.} John Philpot made several saucy retorts when examined by the Queen’s Commissioners, Roper and Cooke, such as his response to Roper’s statement that Philpot was an ‘unmeet man’ to be an archdeacon: Philpot said that he was as meet as the man who currently held the position.\footnote{Ibid., p. 205.} Philpot also used humour when he responded to Roper’s and Cooke’s questioning with a tongue-in-cheek analysis of the effectiveness of their methods of interrogation. After Cooke’s repeated threats that they would send him to prison for his impudence, Philpot responded simply, ‘Hold that argument fast, for it is the best you have’.\footnote{Foxe, \textit{Acts and Monuments} (1563), p. 1391.}

Providing non-answers was another popular method of equivocating. Non-answers included answering questions with questions, answering with so much excess detail as to confuse the story, answering with statements that did not really say anything, and answering with silence. The strategic use of silence was very popular in the sixteenth century. Anne Askew used it, with the excuse that women were not expected to speak out in religious matters. John Lambert also used it: Foxe reported that during Lambert’s trial against Henry VIII, Lambert ‘held his peace, defending himself rather with silence, than with arguments which he saw would nothing at all prevail’\footnote{Ibid., p. 1347.}. This reflects the teachings of both Augustine and Aquinas. Augustine wrote: ‘It is not a lie when truth is passed over in silence, but when falsehood is brought forth in speech’,\footnote{Saint Augustine, ‘Against Lying’, p. 152.} and Aquinas distinguished between keeping silent about the truth and telling falsehoods in legal situations. The first was allowable, because an accused person had no obligation to admit to things that the judge could not legally ask about when proceeding from information based on rumour, partial proof, or even evidence. Hiding details was not lying or trickery but ‘prudent evasion’.\footnote{Zagorin, \textit{Ways of Lying}, p. 29.}
The opposite of responding with silence was responding with excess information in order to obfuscate the truth. Some men tore down the famous Rood at St Margaret's Pattens, and when arrested and accused the men used excess detail to confuse the story. They said that Crome had said that Latimer had said that Cromwell had ordered its removal. This web of name dropping never unravelled, and so the men went unpunished. Thomas Cole also used confusion in his recantation, abjuring in a rambling and awkward sermon about stinking flowers which was so complicated that it was difficult to tell whether he was recanting his beliefs or teaching people how not to garden.

Answers that did not actually say anything also confused the story. William Pykas, when asked if it was lawful to swear, provided a non-answer by saying merely that he could not tell, which could have meant that he could not distinguish the answer, or that he could not say the answer. When asked his opinions about Henry VIII’s supremacy over the church, John Haughton the Carthusian prior answered only that the marriage of the king was the king's business, not his. Sir Thomas More preserved his life for months by answering the king with non-answers regarding the Oath of Supremacy.

Using the ambiguity of language also became an important method of equivocation in sixteenth-century England. It was not a new idea; the Spanish Dominican Raymund of Pennafort suggested it as a method of equivocation in his 1223 Summa. To him, the ambiguity of language provided a foundation for equivocation through statements which possessed alternate meanings. They were not lies because the speaker did not intend to deceive, but merely hoped that the other person believed one meaning even though the other meaning was actually more applicable to the situation. In this method, playing with the conventions of language was essential. As Johann Sommerville says:

‘A consequence of this ...was that a man’s ability to avoid lying while at the same time preventing some disaster could depend upon such arbitrary factors as whether a deceptive ambiguity was available, and whether the speaker had the linguistic skills needed to notice it. Dexterity at punning became a virtue.’

This was especially important because if questioners picked up on the equivocation, they could keep asking until they had a question so specific that it was impossible to hedge. The ultimate goal was to equivocate so well that the questioner did not even notice the equivocation.

When asked to recant, people often played with words in order to satisfy temporal law without denying personal beliefs. Richard Smyth read a retraction, not a recantation, in order to hedge around confessing his beliefs; similarly, Longworth gave a declaration, not a recantation. During John Bradford’s examination, the Chancellor asked Bradford if he was seditious. He said he was not and when accused of lying he justified his actions partly through a re-definition of the

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63 T. Cole, A godly and frutefull sermon, made at Maydestone in the county of Kent the fyrst sonday in Lent (London, 1553).
64 Strype, Ecclesiastical Memorials vol. 1, p. 82.
65 Ibid., p. 195.
67 Ibid., p. 171.
term ‘seditive’ that reflected the spirit of the word’s meaning, and not the letter. During the Oxford disputation in 1554, Latimer confused the discussion on transubstantiation when he chose to use different meanings of the term ‘the body of Christ’, including Christ’s literal body, his perfect body, and what could be interpreted to mean the body of Christ’s believers. By doing this, Latimer also managed to present his beliefs to a wide audience despite the presence of hostile authority, making his equivocation doubly purposeful.

In 1556 Bishop Foster asked John Fortune if he believed in the Catholic Church. Fortune chose to define the Catholic church as the church ‘whereof Christ is the head’ and then said that he did believe in it. Also in 1556, a group of people underwent a mass trial and were asked to recant. The bishop phrased the recantation so that they had to say that they ‘believed in the Catholic Church’. They defined ‘Catholic’ differently than the bishop had, and agreed to recant. When the Bishop of Chichester examined Richard Woodman in 1557, he charged Woodman with rejecting the Catholic Church. Woodman said that he did not reject the Catholic Church, because he defined it as the ‘true church’, which ‘he was in every day’. This could have referred either to himself as a temple for the Holy Spirit or to a group of believers with whom he met. Sir Thomas More once surprised a man named Petit in his house while the latter was in his closet reading. More said: ‘You say you have none of these new [banned] books’, and Petit equivocated by saying simply: ‘Your lordship saw my books and my closet’.

Dr Edward Crome was arguably the master equivocator of Henrican England. As Andrew Pettegree notes in his book Marian Protestantism, Crome always ‘did what was necessary to live and fight another day’. His contemporaries could not accuse him of cowardice, because he always defended the new faith when it most needed defence. ‘In consequence, it is clear that, despite all Crome’s slippery cavillations, he never forfeited the respect of other members of the evangelical elite.’ Over the course of Henry VIII’s reign, Crome managed to recant three times and never lost his position as a respected preacher.

On 13 February 1531, Crome was forced to recant his belief that the Bible should be available for laypeople to read, that prayers for the dead were unimportant, and that ‘the authority of the church ...was not above scripture, but to the church was given authority to expound and explicate it’. He recanted as ordered, but prefaced his articles of recantation with a ‘reforming sermon’ and announced that he had been ordered to read the articles, which negated any idea that he was actually recanting. In 1541, Crome was arrested again, and equivocated again. The king gave him another recantation and told him to preach it with his sermon. The next Sunday Crome preached his sermon, which presented his views as he always had presented them. He said: ‘There be some men that do say that I have been abjured, and some say that I am perjured, but the truth is that I am neither abjured, nor yet perjured’. Then he read the

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69 Foxe, Acts and Monuments (1563), pp. 940, 941.
73 Strype, Ecclesiastical Memorials vol 1, p. 203.
75 Bridgen, London and the Reformation, pp. 331,332.
document the king had given him, and few believed that he meant it. However, Crome could
defend himself to the king, because when challenged for making that statement he could
equivocate by presenting a creative truth: that he had said he was neither abjured nor perjured
because he had not yet read the document that was his abjuration.

In 1546, Crome once again preached a controversial sermon and was arrested for heresy
under the Act of Six Articles. On June 27, he read aloud a clear recantation, which admitted at the
end that he had equivocated. However, he did not specify what exactly had been equivocation
and what had been truth in his recantation, which made people question his sincerity. John Bale
and some other contemporaries felt that this last recantation was real and accused Crome of
falling from grace; others thought that he was simply equivocating once again. It is interesting to
note that Crome had refused to recant at first, and gave in only after people in his circle had been
interrogated and tortured. The timing of his recantation might reflect fear that the same thing
would happen to him, but it also might have been a calculated move to save his friends. They had
been implicated in what Bridgen calls a ‘shadowy plot’, and after Crome’s recantation the
persecution against them ended. This might be another example of the importance of
motivation in justifying a lie. It also shows how people could subvert authority by obeying that
authority, when they were employing methods of creative truth.

Conclusion

Methods of creative truth included the use of humour, non-answers, and the manipulation of
language and terminology. When faced with persecution for their beliefs, reformers employed
these strategies very carefully, for such equivocation came very close to telling lies, which might
then be considered disobedience to authority, blasphemy or perjury and carry a stern
punishment. Thus, the skills needed to create truth had to be learned, practiced and used with
care and discretion. Even more importantly, those who told creative truths had to be very self-
aware. One’s motivation was an essential part of the definition that divided truth from falsehood.

With such careful consideration and strategic use of equivocation, it was possible to
subvert authority through submission to authority. Thomas Becon used the process of
recantation to promote his own reforming works, as did John Tyndale when he used the
experience of recantation as an opportunity to hand out his brother William’s translations of the
Bible. Thomas Cranmer used recantation in an attempt to reconcile his beliefs about spiritual
reform with his sense of obligation to the monarch. Edward Crome recanted to obey his monarch,
in a way that would not compromise his conscience. None of these men were cowards; none of
them are remembered as failures in their faith. Thus, they show how recantation was not
necessarily a shameful act, but rather a unique and effective form of bravery.

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