Chapter 3

A Godly Exposition of Lost Religious Print

In 1601, Robert Barker, the Queen's Printer, wrote a letter to the Master and Wardens of the Stationers' Company. In it Barker complained that fellow Company members Bonham Norton and John Norton, along with the Edinburgh-based bookseller Andrew Hart, were illegally printing Bibles and Psalms in metre. To make matters worse, they were being printed overseas in Dort by ‘persons ... of the most disordered and worst disposed sort’.1 Not only was this infringing Barker’s privilege to print Bibles but it also ran the risk of seditious works coming into England. It is not clear if any action was taken against the stationers, possibly because the works were aimed at the Scottish market. However, copies of these Dort editions survive in a handful of libraries.2

This incident highlights two of the main issues surrounding the entrance of religious texts in the Register. Firstly, the most important works such as the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Psalms, were all held under privilege or patent. Secondly, a large number of religious books were imported as they could be produced more cheaply on the continent. Neither privileged works nor imports were entered in the Register.

In spite of this, religious works account for almost a third of all entries in the Register. Books entered include sermons, moral and devotional works on Christian life, study aids to help with understanding texts and the performance of worship, as well as items of theology, doctrine and controversy. These came in a range of formats, from single-sheet images and tables to illustrated folios consisting of hundreds of pages. Figure 3.1 shows the diverse and flourishing religious publishing market that continued to grow across the decades. While in the 1560s religious works accounted for less than 20% of the overall entries, by the 1630s, this share had risen significantly to 45%. Religious books entered in the Register therefore provide an excellent opportunity to compare survival and entry rates within a large and varied genre.

Print was an important tool for reformers. The German Reformation in particular showed how effectively vernacular print could be used to spread new religious ideas.3 Before 1535, no English Bibles were printed, and the

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2 ESTC S90497, S90814. (USTC 3000682, 3000511).
six editions of the New Testament available in English were imports. It was only under Edward VI that a developed market for vernacular religious works began to emerge, although when Mary I ascended the throne, reformation printers withdrew and tighter restrictions were imposed. Originally, Philip and Mary granted the Stationers’ Company’s charter in order to protect the Catholic Church in England from ‘seditious and heretical books rhymes and treatises … daily published by divers scandalous malicious schismatical and heretical persons’. It is an interesting quirk of fate that only two years later, the Company would be responsible for ensuring books adhered to the Protestant Act of Uniformity in 1559.

The printing of vernacular Bibles, prayer books and catechisms flourished in England during the reign of Elizabeth I, and this continued into the early Stuart period. Under James I came the freedom of wider religious debate, leading to a questioning of authority which would ultimately lead to the near ending of book regulation under the Stationers in 1641.

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6 Mary I, ‘The Stationers’ Company Charter’ (1557), in Ar. i. xxviii.