Across Europe for most of the 16th and 17th centuries rulers sought to apply the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* agreed at Augsburg. That the religion of the ruler should also be the religion of his people was clearly both convenient and practical. It provided ideological cohesion for a political entity, and it allowed the state to use the institutions of the church for the maintenance of moral and social order. At least until the middle of the 17th century lapses in this situation were tolerated, but governments were always on the lookout for opportunities to rectify aberrant situations. Perhaps the best known example of this drive for conformity and cohesion was the fate of Bohemia, like Ireland at the edge of Europe, but unlike Ireland composed of a Protestant majority within the larger Catholic Holy Roman Empire. After 1619 the Protestant political elite of Bohemia was eliminated and a program of Catholic evangelization was implemented to ensure not simply political but religious conformity also. The confessional state was a powerful and pervasive force in early modern Europe.

At first sight Ireland under English control in the 16th and 17th centuries appears to fit this model of the confessional state. In many respects the legal forms that shaped religious life in Ireland imitated those in England, making it a good example of the attempted creation of a confessional state through a reformation from the monarchy downwards. This contrasted starkly with the reform from below, characteristic of 16th-century Scotland. In England and Ireland the respective Acts of Uniformity that established the Church of England (1558) and its Irish counterpart (1560) as state churches were almost identical. Both created a coterminous religious and political community with the monarch as the head of both state and church. Loyalty to this confessional state was proclaimed by attendance at the parish church on Sunday with a fine of 12d for those who did not do so.¹ Again, at the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the legislation passed in England and Ireland to create a

¹ 1 Eliz c. 2 (Eng), 2 Eliz c. 2 (Ire).
uniformity of worship and structures of church government was almost identical. In both countries the parishes of the established church came to fulfil similar functions, moving from being expressions of local community to instruments of state government, charged with the provision of roads, care of the poor, prevention of fire, and the maintenance of law and order. Such linkages between Irish and English legislation on the nature of social and religious order were regarded by some as central to the relationship between the two entities in the 16th and 17th centuries. As the earl of Essex, the lord lieutenant of Ireland in the 1670s, wrote when dealing with the Ulster Presbyterians in 1673, “if some indulgence be granted them I humbly conceive the methods which you may design for England will probably be the fittest to be practised here, for generally the nearer we conform to England in the administration of the government in this county the firmer the interest of the crown [is] supported”. Again in 1672, following Charles II’s declaration of indulgence, Essex, trying to find a solution to the problem of controlling large Presbyterian communities, observed to the earl of Arlington “the best solution I can think of would be to do the same here as is practis’d in England which is to license some places and prohibit others”.

There is much that is attractive about the neat conception of the alignment of theological and secular power in a confessionalized state as set out in the Irish reformation statutes and derived from a quasicolonial relationship with England the early modern period. This view certainly provided a convenient model, used by an earlier generation of Irish historians to describe religious and political change over the early modern period. The idea is all the more beguiling because of its ability to link together a number of disparate themes into a coherent pattern of change, driven by London or Dublin and implemented in the Irish provinces by the officials of the central administration. Thus the government policy of land confiscation and plantation in Ireland could be neatly linked with centrally driven religious change creating a “top-down” model of social and religious change. Thus Protestantism and the English administration in Dublin could be associated with

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4 Airey, Essex Papers, p. 15.