This chapter argues that we view early modern English Catholicism as a religious tradition characterised by a long-term, difficult process of transformed self-understanding that compelled its members, if it was to survive at all, to come to terms with the unanticipated and traumatic elimination of much that had defined it for centuries. In multiple ways, early modern English Catholicism involved attempts to cope with the exercise of royal power wielded in an unprecedented, unexpected manner. This forced a gradual yet drastic shift in how Catholics eventually came to understand themselves in England: they came to regard ‘religion’ in a recognisably modern sense, as something separate and separable from the exercise of public political power and the social relationships constitutive of society at large.

This had not been the case in medieval England, when for many centuries the assertions and public practices of Catholicism were presupposed in the exercise of power, social relationships, economic transactions, moral expectations and education. As I have argued, following scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Peter Harrison about the creation of ‘religion’ as a category distinct from other domains of human life, this shift was part of a broader process at work in early modern Europe as a result of disruptions pursuant to the Reformation, a shift that followed different trajectories in different political regimes.¹ Its distinctive path in England had important consequences for Catholics. The disorienting, transformative changes that began under Henry VIII in the early 1530s, the much more radical Edwardian alterations in the Church of England after 1547, their partial reversal under Mary in the 1550s, and their restoration and solidification in Elizabethan forms during her long reign, dictated for Catholics the political, social and cultural realities within

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which something unnervingly novel would have to be attempted: a definition and practice of being Catholic not only shorn of its institutions and public expressions, but adapted to in a situation in which the crown, its officials, its church and the dominant culture were hostile antagonists rather than supportive co-religionists. The disagreements among English Catholics about how best to cope with these forcibly imposed realities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the diverse and often conflicting improvisations devised to address them, help to explain some of the most important characteristics of early modern English Catholicism. Once both post-Jacobite Catholic laity and clergy had accepted the conditions that compelled their self-redefinition, and the English state had accepted them as a politically obedient religious minority in some respects analogous to Protestant nonconformists, we can speak of the end of early modern and the beginning of modern English Catholicism – a transition that occurred around the time the seminary at Douai was suppressed in France (1793), makeshift provisions for some of its refugees were improvised at Crook Hall in County Durham, England, and Ushaw College was constructed and opened, and that in subsequent decades would include such a conspicuous nineteenth-century renewal in the era of Wiseman, Newman and Manning.

This chapter unpacks the question, ‘what is early modern English Catholicism?’ The question involves three dimensions: one chronological (‘early modern’); one geographical or national or ethnic (‘English’); and one sociological or ecclesiological or theological (‘Catholicism’). None of them seems as obvious as we might think. My basic point is that considering the period as a whole we should take as our subject matter Roman Catholicism in England, which nevertheless could not have been what it was apart from Catholicism elsewhere in Europe, and which began with sudden events in the 1530s but ended as a gradual process in the late eighteenth century.

It might be thought tendentious to identify Catholicism with Roman Catholicism, especially insofar as I have implied that we should regard early

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2 Lisa McClain has described many of these improvisations and adaptations among lay Catholics and the clergy who ministered to them in London, Cornwall and the northern counties in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, but the difficulties and disagreements pursuant to the Reformation persisted throughout the early modern period and affected all English Catholics in one way or another: McClain, Lest We Be Damned: Practical Innovation and Lived Experience among Catholics in Protestant England, 1559–1642 (New York, 2004).