

A Short History of the Church of England

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*From the Reformation
to the Present Day*

By

Hervé Picton

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PREFACE

As its title indicates, this book is a *short* history of the Church of England. Retracing nearly five centuries of Church history in less than two hundred pages is no easy task. Even if the pre-Reformation Church, Nonconformity and the whole of the Anglican Communion fall outside the scope of this study, concision has been of paramount importance. Rather than approaching my topic from a variety of angles, I have elected to make some choices that will appear to some as regrettable, but that were always necessary in order to avoid a too simplistic account of the forces, agents and events that shaped the course of this long and rich chapter of English history. I have thus chosen to focus on the political aspects of my topic (which are so central in the case of an established Church) as well as on doctrinal and liturgical matters, at the expense of, for example, ecclesiological issues (church architecture and decoration). One might also regret the scant treatment of clergy and parish life. These are indeed very important and interesting issues which, in order to be fully appreciated, require a broad understanding of the wider religious context which the present work precisely attempts to provide.

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INTRODUCTION

The years 1533-1534 were crucial in the dramatic process that resulted in the English Church's breakaway from the Church of Rome. However, are the events that took place in those years the only cause of Henry VIII's decision to sever all ties with the papacy? The question deserves serious attention, as the split that occurred in 1534 seems in some respects to have had medieval roots. Indeed, the Church in England had long been estranged from the papacy when King Henry ascended the throne. Long before the 16th century it had acquired a distinct national character partly due to its insularity. When at the end of the 6th century Pope Gregory had sent Augustine to evangelize Britain, he had wisely enjoined him to exercise caution and be tolerant of local specificities. Only one century later, Bede advocated the translation of *the Creed* and *Pater Noster* into the vernacular. The following centuries were marked by a progressive loosening of the ties between the English Church and the papacy as English kings gradually freed themselves from papal authority and asserted their sovereignty on religious matters. Among other things, they secured the supremacy of royal courts over ecclesiastical courts and strengthened the Crown's right of presentation. William the Conqueror's willful independence vis-à-vis the Pope, the tense relations between Rome and the English kings in the course of the 12th century (which culminated with the murder of Archbishop Becket in 1170), the excommunication of John Lackland at the beginning of the 13th century, or indeed the anti-papal legislation enacted at Edward II's instigation in the 14th century, are some of the episodes that punctuate the troubled relations of English monarchs with Rome in a context of rising nationalism. By the end of the 14th century, England had effectively obtained its religious independence, the king having once and for all imposed his role as mediator between the Church and the papacy. To all this may be added, in a context of growing anticlericalism and weakening papal authority (due in part to clerical abuses and the aftermath of the Great Schism), an increasingly pressing need for change of which John Wyclif, a forerunner of the Reformation and the first translator of the Bible in English, was to become the spokesman.

If, on the eve of Henry VIII's decision to break away from Rome, the idea of an independent Church of England headed by the king would in all

likelihood have seemed fanciful to most of his subjects, the context was nevertheless ripe for such a move. This might explain why Henry had no great difficulty implementing the string of measures that eventually resulted in the severing of the ties that still united England and Rome. The causes of the schism were multiple: there were deep, long-term causes such as antipapism, Church abuses, or the rise of Protestantism. The direct causes, admittedly, were the King's obsession with his succession, but also the disastrous state of royal finances. What resulted from this first stage in the English Reformation was merely a form of "Catholicism without the Pope," the king having become the Supreme Head of the Church of England (which henceforth became a state or established Church). From that moment on, as the present book will seek to make clear, religion and politics became closely entangled, the history of the Church of England being also, at some level, a political history of England. Depending on the monarch, this close proximity of Church and State had positive or negative consequences. In the case of Elizabeth I, one could easily argue that the consequences were on balance positive and that the Elizabethan settlement allowed England to enjoy peace at home for a comparatively long period. The same could not be said of course of the Stuarts whose obstinacy and misguided ecclesiastico-political views resulted in war and revolution. All in all, English religious history seems nevertheless to have been less violent than continental (and particularly French) religious history, but it was never plain sailing, what with the exclusion and persecution of Dissenters, and Anglican comprehensiveness itself which was—and still is—a source of tensions *within* the Church.

Today, the Church has all but gained its independence from political power and lives in almost perfect harmony with other faiths. However, it is facing divisive issues which might jeopardize its unity: the ordination of female bishops, homosexuality, and other ethical or societal issues. More generally, its role in an increasingly secular society is being questioned. Some, inside and outside the Church, have even called for its disestablishment, arguing that it is no longer a national Church. What the future holds for the Church is uncertain, but history can give us clues, some of which, I hope, this book will be able to provide.

CHAPTER ONE

HENRY VIII AND THE BREACH WITH ROME (1509-1547)

The Causes of the split

If the well-known affair of Henry VIII's divorce—or rather marriage annulment—may rightly be considered as one of the major causes having led to the breach with Rome, other forces were at work in the momentous political and institutional process which culminated in 1534.

Henry's obsession with his succession, admittedly, was only one direct and immediate cause. Other causes, which were both deeper and more distant, played an equally important part in the schism. Indeed, it is likely that the King would never have been able to impose such radical steps—arguably more political than theological—if the social and political context had not been so favourable.

As historians rarely agree on how to interpret the events leading to the breach (some stress political factors while others, sometimes with conflicting interpretations, focus on the religious context), the present chapter will be confined to a broad synthesis of the different interpretations.

Among the long-term causes features the intellectual revival in England at the beginning of the 16th century. It was characterized at once by a wider diffusion of knowledge (in which Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1440 had played a crucial part), as well as by the rise of a humanist movement of an essentially religious character which, although critical of the Church, did not question the fundamentals of its doctrine. The Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), who was to teach at Cambridge for two years, had a decisive influence on some English theologians. An outspoken critic of medieval scholastics and its metaphysical subtleties, he proposed a more rational and historical reading of Scripture and even advocated the translation of the Bible into English.

A brilliant scholar and a forerunner of the Reformation's greatest thinkers, he also satirized the Church's obscurantism and corruption mercilessly in what has remained his most famous work, *The Praise of Folly*, published in 1511. While at Cambridge, Erasmus had formed friendships and built bridges with some distinguished scholars and theologians like John Colet (1467-1519) and Thomas More (1478-1535), the renowned author of *Utopia* (1516). In this book, More (who would later pay with his life for his steadfast loyalty to the Church of Rome) exposed the ignorance of the clergy and advocated tolerance in religion. While remaining within the limits of strict doctrinal orthodoxy, Colet, More and their fellow thinkers called for a reform of the Church and thus prepared—although not willingly—their contemporaries' minds for what was to happen in 1534.

The rise of anticlericalism, especially among an increasingly educated and powerful middle class, also explains that Henry VIII was able to impose a number of radical changes in the Church's organization without much opposition. Two centuries before the schism, Wyclif had with good reason stigmatized such clerical abuses as worldliness, immorality and corruption, things having changed but little by the time of Henry's reign. The grievances of the King's subjects against the Church were therefore legion.¹ Among them were the Pope's excessive authority, the Church's abusive rights in legal and fiscal matters, the cupidity of prelates as well as, in some cases, the idleness and depravity of the clergy.

Absenteeism, simony and pluralism, which involved one clergyman holding several benefices, were then widespread (and remained so until the 19th century). Roughly one quarter of all benefices were held by pluralists who, evidently, could not reside in several parishes at the same time, absenteeism going hand in hand with pluralism. Although in most cases absent incumbents were replaced by curates so as to avoid leaving local populations in a moral and spiritual vacuum, the latter were often underpaid and not always up to the job: parish clergy were often the sons of uneducated peasants and only a tiny minority had received a proper university training.

Lastly, the extraordinary wealth of the Church, with shocking income disparities among the clergy, naturally fanned the resentment and jealousy of its critics. Thomas Linacre, the King's personal physician had for example received several benefices from which he drew a substantial income as a reward for his good and loyal service to the Crown. Thomas

¹ Some historians, however, challenge the anticlericalism thesis while stressing the vitality of the Catholic religion on the eve of Henry's reformation. See in particular Christopher Haig, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 25-39.

Wolsey, the King's chief adviser and right-hand man until his fall in 1529, fueled the prevailing anticlericalism by accumulating preferment: he was the incumbent of several deaneries, a bishopric, an archbishopric and was finally appointed cardinal before becoming the Pope's legate. His annual income at the end of his life totaled approximately £50 000, a prodigious sum at that time which represented roughly half of the Crown's annual budget.² Wolsey, who was not only immensely rich, but also corrupt and dangerously powerful, led a lavish lifestyle and had a regular mistress who bore him several children (a rather common thing, incidentally, among the secular clergy who, although celibate, were not yet bound by the vow of chastity). He understandably aroused the hate and fear of his contemporaries, and seems to have crystallized all their grievances against a Church he was in no position to reform.

The rise of Protestantism and in particular Luther's growing influence in England also contributed to widening the gap between England and Rome even though initially—and paradoxically—Henry VIII had been a staunch opponent of Luther's views. Quite a few historians have rightly stressed the indigenous roots of the English Reformation, the life and work of John Wyclif (1320-1384) being a case in point. An Oxford-trained theologian, Wyclif vigorously exposed the worldliness of the clergy and stressed the idea of a direct relation between Man and God, thus challenging the role and the authority of a deeply corrupt Church. He was convinced that the only valid authority was that of Scripture which should in consequence be accessible to *all* believers without any clerical mediation (hence his translation of the Bible into English). It bears stressing that Wyclif, who called for the dissolution of the monasteries and rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, was a forerunner of Luther's and Calvin's ideas one century and a half later. His ideas were to inspire the Lollards, a group of itinerant preachers who successfully undertook to disseminate them among the poor and were mercilessly persecuted for heresy under Henry IV's reign. If men can be killed, however, their ideas cannot be easily eradicated. Wyclif's ideas, which had survived until Henry VIII's reign, thus paved the way for a Protestant reformation of England. An English Protestant movement deeply influenced by Luther's ideas began to emerge at Cambridge in the 1520s. A small group of scholars nicknamed "Little Germany," which counted in its ranks some future bishops and archbishops such as Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer, Matthew Parker or Nicholas Ridley, regularly met at the White Horse

² Wolsey's illegitimate son, Thomas Winter, was himself a notorious pluralist who drew a comfortable income from his various benefices.

Tavern to discuss Luther's views on justification by faith or to denounce the corruption of their Church. The King and the bishops quickly responded to that incipient dissidence by publishing, as early as 1521, *The Defense of the Seven Sacraments* which, ironically, earned the King the gratitude of the Pope as well as the title of "Defender of the Faith."³ The movement was quickly quashed; some of its members ended up on the stake, while others, like Cranmer or William Tyndale who would later translate the Bible into English, fled to Germany. Despite the repression, the "heresy" quickly spread throughout the country, among the middle class especially, part of the gentry being receptive to the new thought.

Another important factor contributing to England's estrangement from Rome was the rise of nationalism, a feeling that had been deeply exacerbated by the Hundred Years' War. By the 15th century, the English people could no longer tolerate the interference into their national affairs of a papacy increasingly regarded as an alien power. This strong national feeling had been accompanied by a strengthening of royal authority, particularly since the advent of the Tudors. As early as the 12th century, relations between the English Crown and Rome had been strained, especially where appointments to high clerical office and the competence of ecclesiastical courts in cases involving clergy were concerned. The Constitutions of Clarendon, introduced in 1164 in order to impose the supremacy of royal courts over ecclesiastical courts, reflected Henry II's will to rule over Church affairs within his kingdom.

Royal prerogatives—and thus England's independence—in Church affairs were to be reaffirmed over the course of the 14th century with the passing of several laws that made papal appointments to Church livings illegal and forbade all appeals to Rome in cases pertaining to the King's law.⁴ Despite these growing restrictions on his authority over English affairs, the Pope had managed to maintain some of his prerogatives until the end of the Middle Ages: the appointment of bishops in particular was in most cases the result of tough negotiations between Rome and the King. In the years preceding the schism, moreover, the Pope's legate Cardinal Wosley had led a ruinous foreign policy intended to serve the interests of the papacy (as well as his own) more than those of the country, thus fueling an already deep-seated antipapism.

³ English monarchs still bear the title.

⁴ Several versions of the *Statutes of Provisors and Praemunire* were passed between 1351 and 1393. It bears stressing that this growing independence of royal power from papal influence is not specific to England, as the conflict opposing King Philip IV of France and Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 testifies.

To all this should be added the fact that the foundation of a modern nation in Tudor times was conditioned by the establishment of a strong central power and efficient system of government; and this required the neutralization of the Church's parallel administration, in the legal and fiscal areas in particular.

The long-term causes of Henry VIII's schism are therefore multiple and varied, some being specific to England, others being common to all Christian nations. In any case, none of these causes taken separately would have been enough to provoke the breach with Rome. It is the conjunction of all these factors—in association with more immediate causes—which alone can account for the crucial events which, in the course of the 1530s, were to transform the life of the English nation irreversibly.

In a context eminently favourable to England's parting with Rome, two main factors can be regarded as having triggered the schism. The first one was Henry VIII's obsession with producing a male heir to secure his succession.⁵ The second one was the disastrous state of royal finances.

In 1509, thanks to a papal dispensation, the young king had married his brother Arthur's widow, Catherine of Aragon, with whom he had had only one surviving child, Princess Mary, who became Queen of England in 1553 and was notoriously known as "Bloody Mary." Twenty years later, as the chances of ever having a male heir grew slimmer by the day (Catherine was now over forty), this marriage increasingly appeared to the King as a fateful mistake. With the help of his Lord Chancellor Thomas Wolsey, he sought to obtain the annulment of this first marriage by Pope Clement VII in order to be free to marry his young mistress Anne Boleyn who, he hoped, would at last give him a legitimate heir.⁶ A keen amateur theologian, Henry was to invoke Leviticus to support his request: "And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless."⁷ It logically followed that since the special dispensation previously granted by Jules II contradicted God's will, it was unlawful. What should have been a mere formality actually raised two problems: it was first of all difficult for Pope Clement to annul his predecessor's decision without seriously undermining papal authority; more importantly, such a decision was bound to antagonize Catherine's nephew, Emperor Charles V, whose prisoner he was at the time. The Pope prevaricated, first delegating his

⁵ Stability was indeed crucial after the chaotic episode of the War of the Roses (1455-1487).

⁶ It was then quite common for princes and high-ranking noblemen to obtain such annulments.

⁷ Lev. 20:21.

cardinals Campeggio and Wolsey to try the case in England, before moving the trial back to Rome at the Queen's request. After two years of arduous negotiations and unsuccessful stratagems, the annulment case was far from being settled and the King's patience ran thin. Wolsey's patent failure precipitated his downfall: rather absurdly accused of *praemunire*,⁸ he was arrested in 1529, stripped of his office and property (in particular his magnificent palace of Hampton Court) and Thomas More was appointed Lord Chancellor in his place.

The disastrous state of royal finances in the 1520s also helps to explain why the breach with Rome quickly became irreversible: once the monasteries had been dissolved and the Church's assets seized by the Crown, turning back the clock was impossible. On the death of Henry VII, who had handled the Crown's money wisely, the royal coffers were full, which allowed his son Henry VIII not only to levy few taxes, but also to live in extravagance and spend lavishly. Wolsey's ruinous financial policies also explain the difficulties of the royal treasury. Indeed, the King's adviser, who was somewhat unreceptive to economic realities, seems to have seriously underestimated the potential benefits of trade for the kingdom. To make things worse, he often conflicted with Parliament which was naturally reluctant to grant him the money to finance his expensive—and often perilous—wars and ventures. Finally, he unsuccessfully resorted to coercion to increase the State's revenues, provoking the anger of the propertied classes in the process. On the eve of Henry's schism, the treasure left by his father had been entirely dilapidated, so that radical measures were now needed to refill the royal coffers. Parting company with Rome would kill two birds with one stone.

The Breach with Rome

With the support of Parliament, which represented a middle class increasingly hostile to Church abuses, Henry undertook to subjugate the English clergy who were in their vast majority still loyal to Rome. He thus skillfully relied on the anticlericalism prevailing in the House of Commons to achieve his goal. The subjugation of the Church was conducted step by step under the aegis of Thomas Cromwell, a close adviser to the King since 1529 and a highly ambitious, ruthless, and anticlerical statesman. In 1531, the two Convocations were accused of a breach of *praemunire* and forced to buy the King's pardon for a total sum

⁸ In other words accused of taking his orders from a foreign court, in this case the Roman see.

of £118,000 (a timely manner to refill the State's coffers) and to acknowledge him as "Protector and Supreme Head of the English Church and Clergy [...] so far as the law of Christ allows."

The year 1532 saw a string of measures that included the quasi-abolition of "annates," a Roman tax levied on bishops' livings (it would now fill the royal coffers instead), as well as the Supplication against the Ordinaries, an act of Parliament which denied the Church the right to legislate on civil matters like marriage. In May, Parliament also passed the Submission of the Clergy which allowed the King to legislate on Church affairs and to oppose his veto to any measure passed by Convocation, the legislative body of the Church. This last measure caused Thomas More, who had remained faithful to Rome, to resign his office as Chancellor. Henry, infuriated by the resistance orchestrated by some of the bishops, was on this occasion to declare before a delegation from the House of Commons: "they [the bishops] be but half our subjects, yea, and scarce our subjects," thus stigmatizing the allegiance of the English prelates to the Pope who, in England, would soon be nothing more than the "bishop of Rome." Events unfolded even more rapidly during the year 1533 with Henry's secret marriage to Anne Boleyn and the appointment of the Lutheran theologian Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury. The next step was the passing of the Act in Restraint of Appeals whose preamble strongly asserted England's sovereignty as well as the King's undivided power:

This realm of England is an empire, [...] governed by one supreme head and king, [...] unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people, divided in terms and by names of spirituality and temporality, be bounden and ought to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience.

This very same text, which underlined the divine nature of royal authority, also denied the possibility of any appeal to Roman courts in Church cases and stated the King's judicial prerogatives with the utmost emphasis:

He being also institute and furnished, by the goodness and sufferance of Almighty God, with plenary, whole, and entire power, pre-eminence, authority, prerogative and jurisdiction, to render and yield justice, and final determination to all manner of folk [...] in all causes, [...] without restraint, or provocation to any foreign princes or potentates of the world.⁹

⁹ Henry Gee and W. J. Hardy, eds., *Documents Illustrative of English Church History*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1910), 187.

Henry had probably been influenced by his reading of *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, a copy of which had opportunely been offered to him by his young mistress Anne and in which the English Lutheran William Tyndale (soon to become a martyr) argued that a prince was accountable to God only. He may also have been receptive to the arguments presented in *Collectanea*, a collection of documents compiled by his advisers three years before in order to establish England's judicial independence and the King's supremacy in Church matters. In any case, all legal and institutional obstacles to the annulment of Henry's marriage had now been removed and, crucially, no one would from then on be able to oppose the King's plans by appealing to Rome. The annulment of Henry's first marriage was pronounced by Archbishop Cranmer on May 23, 1533 (Anne was crowned on June 1) which, quite logically, resulted in their excommunication by the Pope a few weeks later.

The year 1534 made the breach irreversible with a series of acts of Parliament which transferred all papal rights to the Crown or, depending on the case, to the see of Canterbury, the Pope being henceforth referred to as "the bishop of Rome." In March was passed the Succession Act which confirmed the King's second marriage and made Henry and Anne's children the true heirs to the Crown (Princess Mary, Catherine of Aragon's daughter, was declared a bastard). The Act also required the King's subjects to swear an oath to support the new regime. Those who refused the oath risked life imprisonment and the confiscation of their property. The Act of Supremacy passed by Parliament at the end of the year confirmed Henry's title as "Supreme Head of the Church of England," but the restricting clause of 1531 about the "law of Christ" was now omitted. In order to stifle dissent, the infamous Treason Act made opposition to Royal Supremacy punishable by death. The Act of Supremacy also gave the King the power to visit any Church institution, a right he was going to exercise extensively in the following years. In just two years, Henry had achieved all his goals which, crucially, had involved becoming the only source of authority in the Church. In every sense of the word, the divorce had now been consummated, this first stage in the English Reformation having been essentially the result of political manoeuvres engineered by the King and Cromwell with the not wholly disinterested support of Parliament.

These upheavals did not generate much opposition on the part of a population generally grateful to the first Tudor kings for having restored peace and prosperity in the kingdom. However, the few brave opponents to the new regime who had remained faithful to Rome were persecuted mercilessly. Such was the fate of Elizabeth Barton ("the nun of Kent")

who, in 1534, was hanged along with six other women for denouncing Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn. In the same year, two hundred Franciscans were thrown into prison where many of them met their death. In May and June 1535, several monks were executed at Tyburn for denying that the King was Supreme Head of the Church. The Bishop of Rochester John Fischer and Henry's former friend and Chancellor Sir Thomas More, who had both refused to swear the oath of supremacy, were beheaded in June before huge, respectful crowds, and soon became martyrs of the Catholic faith. Cromwell's ruthless handling of dissent quickly discouraged those still entertaining doubts about the legitimacy of Henry's claims from openly opposing the changes.

One last step was necessary to make the breach with Rome total and irreversible: the dissolution of the monasteries. It took the King and his Chancellor four years to carry through an operation whose motives were twofold: the dissolution would opportunely balance the deficit of the royal Treasury, but would also sever the last link that tied the English Church to Rome, since the religious houses, which were placed under the direct authority of the Pope, still escaped the King's control. Henry indeed had a fairly precise idea of these institutions' wealth, having ordered a survey of all Church revenues in 1534.¹⁰ The following year, Cromwell was charged with organizing visitations of religious houses (it was now possible thanks to the Act of Supremacy), which enabled him to accumulate incriminating evidence against the monasteries. The conditions in which the visitations were organized were in most cases questionable since the evidence gathered by the royal visitors, whose impartiality can be doubted, would later be used to justify the dissolution of the monasteries.

The next step in 1536 was the passing of a statute providing for the suppression of the smaller institutions which were presented as dens of iniquity where "manifest sin, vicious, carnal and abominable living is daily used and committed among the little and small abbeys, priories, and other religious houses."¹¹ As expected, this first wave of dissolutions generated huge proceeds which were immediately transferred to the Crown. All this, however, was not effected without humanity since the monks involved were given the choice to either join other monasteries or become members of the secular clergy; those who preferred to renounce

¹⁰ It was revealed that the Church alone possessed one quarter of the kingdom and that the revenues of the monasteries totaled an annual £200,000 which, according to contemporary estimates, represented roughly one fifteenth of the country's revenues. No wonder then that the Church aroused the cupidity not only of the King, but also of some laymen.

¹¹ Gee and Hardy, 257.

religious life altogether were even provided with pensions. The arbitrary character of these measures, however, appeared unacceptable to large sections of the population, especially in the North of the country which, since the advent of the Tudors, had suffered from the South's hegemony and where monasteries had remained popular. What was initially a mere popular uprising in Lincolnshire quickly spread to all the Northern counties and turned into a full-fledged rebellion led by the local gentry and aristocracy. What became known as "the Pilgrimage of Grace" of 1536 was quashed ruthlessly by a monarch staunchly determined to enforce his authority: most of the leaders, including the York lawyer Robert Aske, were hanged in 1537. The next three years witnessed a second wave of "spontaneous" dissolutions involving the bigger houses whose abbots, probably chastened by the failure of the Northern rebellion, surrendered to the King. Those brave enough to resist, such as the abbots of Reading, Glastonbury or Colchester, ended on the scaffold. By the end of 1540, the dissolution was complete.

The dissolution—like Henry's schism itself—was carried out briskly and efficiently; its balance sheet is an impressive one since it practically doubled the Crown's annual revenues. Indeed, if some of the newly acquired wealth allowed the creation of six new dioceses and the foundation of new colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, most of the spoils went to refill a royal treasury by then in desperate need of funds. Most of the lands that had been appropriated were either sold or rented to laymen who went to swell the ranks of an increasingly prosperous middle class, and whose complicity in despoiling the Church would make them the *de facto* allies of Protestantism.¹² Economic interests, therefore, partly explain why—with the notable exception of the Northern rebellion—the dissolution provoked little unrest. To this can be added the fact that the monasteries had long been regarded—perhaps unfairly—as outdated institutions whose contribution to the life of the Church and to society had become negligible.

Catholicism without the Pope?

In the years following the schism, the supporters of the Reformation might well have believed that England was on its way to becoming a

¹² As in many cases the new lay owners were already managing these lands on behalf of the monasteries, land transfers went on relatively smoothly. One interesting case in point is Oliver Cromwell whose family had become rich after acquiring Church lands under Henry VIII's reign and who, about a hundred years later, turned England into a Puritan republic.

Protestant nation. For purely political reasons, King Henry was to bring about a reconciliation with the very same Lutherans he had chased from the country only a few years before. As we have seen, he had entrusted the settlement of his divorce to his faithful Protestant archbishop Thomas Cranmer and, to strengthen his case, had even sought the support of some Lutheran princes. The threat represented by the alliance of Emperor Charles V and King Francis I of France also explains the contacts and negotiations established with the continental Lutherans between 1535 and 1538. Logically, several exiled reformers such as Hugh Latimer, Nicholas Ridley and Nicholas Shaxton were recalled to England and even given bishoprics. The Royal Injunctions of 1536 required that the *Pater Noster*, the *Creed* and the Ten Commandments be taught in English and that each parish purchase a copy of the Bible and make it available to all. The “Great Bible,” as it came to be known, drew extensively from Tyndale’s and Coverdale’s translations and was first introduced in churches in 1539, a new version prefaced by Cranmer being published the following year.¹³

A slight Lutheran inflection of the Church’s doctrine can be detected in the few changes sanctioned by the Ten Articles of 1536 which were the result of an awkward compromise between reformers and conservatives, but may also have reflected the King’s personal beliefs. The Ten Articles only mention the sacraments of baptism, penitence and the Eucharist (without explicitly denying the other four) and the doctrine of the real presence is reaffirmed without, however, a single reference to transubstantiation.¹⁴ Moreover, justification is obtained by faith *and* good works, no clear pronouncement being made on the validity of Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith alone which Henry found abominable: “justification is remission of sin and reconciliation to God by the merits of Christ; but good works are necessary.” Contrary to the Protestants’ wishes, prayers for the dead are encouraged and only the most blatant abuses in the worship of saints and images are condemned. The authority of Scripture, one of the central tenets of Luther’s doctrine, is emphasized, however. These few concessions to Lutheranism did not fundamentally challenge Catholic orthodoxy and the Ten Articles, later confirmed by the

¹³ One will never stress enough the influence of this first official English Bible which later served as a basis for the King James Version and inspired generations of English-speaking writers steeped in Biblical narrative and phraseology. Needless to say the Bible also had an impact on the English language itself, as for several centuries it remained the only text available to a majority of people.

¹⁴ Catholic sacraments also include Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination and Extreme Unction. There are, by contrast, only two Protestant sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

royal injunctions of 1538, represent the culminating point of Henry's reformation of the Church of England. These dark years for Catholicism were also marked by the emergence of a genuine Protestant fervour among the population, which was alas accompanied by the plunder and profanation of a number of shrines and relics. Such was for instance the fate of the shrine of Britain's first Christian martyr, Saint Alban, in Hertfordshire. Needless to say that in a context of what increasingly looked like royal absolutism, the destruction of the shrine of Becket, who symbolized the Church's resistance to royal tyranny, took on a peculiar significance.¹⁵

The hopes of the reformers were quickly dashed, however. Indeed, as early as 1537 was published *The Bishops' Book* which complemented the Ten Articles and was amended extensively by the King who gave to Cranmer's text a distinctly Catholic slant. The validity of the seven Catholic sacraments was reaffirmed as well as the doctrines of justification and the purgatory. This may well have reflected Henry's own personal convictions, but it could just as well be interpreted as a skilful response to the conservative rebellion which had set the North ablaze only a year before.¹⁶ In any case, a further step towards Catholic orthodoxy was taken with the Six Articles Act imposed by the King in 1539 in order to put a stop to the propagation of Protestant doctrines and practices. The Act, which described the "evils of diversity of opinions," and was soon nicknamed "the whip with six strings," provided severe penalties for those who denied its points of doctrine. It restored transubstantiation, priestly celibacy, chastity vows (for former monks and nuns), Communion in one kind, private masses and finally—the sixth string of the whip—auricular confession.

This restoration of Catholic doctrine, which was abhorrent to the reforming party, caused some Protestant bishops such as Latimer and Shaxton to resign their bishoprics. They were quickly imprisoned. Cranmer, who always put his loyalty to Henry before his Lutheran beliefs, was never seriously threatened, but was nevertheless wise enough to send his German wife back to Germany. Until the end of Henry's reign the law was enforced with the utmost severity. Among the victims of Henry's ruthlessness was the young Anne Askew who, at the age of twenty-five,

¹⁵ Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury, had been murdered in 1170 for bravely opposing King Henry II in the name of the Church's independence. Not surprisingly, the plunder of his shrine brought in a lot of money to the Crown.

¹⁶ Henry quite rightly believed that only the King could guarantee the kingdom's unity. This of course would give credit to the view that his doctrinal hesitations at the end of his reign were essentially due to political constraints.

was burnt on the stake after being tortured for having denied the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. Another victim of the restoration of orthodoxy was the Chancellor Thomas Cromwell, who had been instrumental in bringing England close to the Lutherans and had engineered Henry's short-lived marriage with the Protestant princess Anne of Cleves.¹⁷ At the instigation of some of Henry's conservative advisers, he was unjustly charged with heresy, treason and corruption, and beheaded on Tower Green in July 1540.

The return to Catholic orthodoxy was complete with the publication in 1543 of a book revised and prefaced by Henry himself, *The King's Book*, which incorporated the points of doctrine of the Six Articles, emphasized the role of good works in justification as well as the importance of free will, and encouraged the worship of Mary and the saints. The only major difference with Roman Catholic doctrine was that the book once again vigorously asserted royal supremacy, so that the Church of England's doctrine in the last years of Henry's reign can aptly be described as "Catholicism without the Pope." This conservative victory was complete with a statute of 1543 which forbade the less educated to read the Bible for fear they might misinterpret it.¹⁸

On Henry's death in 1547, what was left of Protestantism? Not much as we have seen, if we except small liturgical changes such as the introduction of a book of devotions in the vernacular or an English *Litany* revised and translated by Cranmer in which the invocation of saints was minimized—which was not a problem to Henry who disliked superstitions and the worship of relics. The King had also ordered the translation of some prayers, of the Ten Commandments and, above all, of the Bible. If, admittedly, there had been a reform of the Church, there had been no Reformation, the 1534 schism having merely resulted in giving the Church of England a distinct national character. Henry had to all appearances remained faithful to the Catholic faith and was furthermore suspicious of a Protestant theology which, with its emphasis on the authority of Scripture, implicitly undermined all other forms of authority, including his own.

¹⁷ A disastrous marriage indeed as Anne was repudiated by Henry only a few days after the wedding in January 1540.

¹⁸ What was also at stake, obviously, was restoring the authority of the clergy in opposition to the authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) which was—and still is—a central tenet of Protestantism.

CHAPTER TWO

FROM EDWARD VI TO ELIZABETH (1547-1603)

Towards a Protestant Church (1547-1553)

A nine-year-old child was to succeed Henry VIII who had rather unexpectedly entrusted the education of the future king to Protestant tutors like John Cheke or Richard Cox and had put in place a Regency Council whose members had for the most part reforming sympathies. Henry, who had in all likelihood remained a Catholic but had nevertheless paved the way for a radical reform of the Church, still defies any attempt to define his personal theology. The only certainty in this matter is that he wanted Edward to be associated with a reforming party whose ascendancy must have appeared to him as a foregone conclusion. Securing the continuance of his dynasty and the unity of the kingdom obviously mattered more to him than the settlement of theological issues. Be that as it may, it was the Scottish Calvinist John Knox who completed the young prince's education before becoming his chaplain in 1551.

The young king's uncle, Edward Seymour, was a staunch Protestant. On Henry's death, he immediately took up the reins of power, got himself appointed Lord Protector of the Realm and gave himself the title of Duke of Somerset. With the help of Cranmer, who now had a free hand and was increasingly influenced by continental reformers, he lost no time in steering England on the path of Protestantism. Like Henry's reforms, the Edwardian Reformation was imposed by the State, Convocation hardly being consulted in the process. It bears stressing that despite a rather wide consensus on England's independence from Rome, the Church—just like the country itself—remained deeply divided on some core doctrinal issues. The Catholic bishops who opposed the new regime were forced to resign or were imprisoned while their Protestant brethren regained favour with the King and his entourage. In such a context, Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer took a prominent part in disseminating Protestant doctrines throughout the country. In his long, forceful sermons, Latimer would vigorously condemn the Roman doctrine of the mass, the worship of relics and images and even rail against the Pope himself, “that Italian bishop

yonder, [the devil's] chaplain." He relentlessly denounced those worldly prelates who lived in opulence and luxury while neglecting their pastoral duties:

But now for the fault of unpreaching prelates, methink I could guess what might be said for excusing of them. They are so troubled with lordly living, they be so placed in palaces, crouched in courts, ruffling in their rents, dancing in their dominions, burdened with ambassages, pampering of their paunches, like a monk that maketh his jubilee; munching in their mangers, and moiling in their gay manors and mansions, and so troubled with loitering in their lordships, that they cannot attend it.¹

Latimer, who did not lack courage, also denounced in some of his sermons a number of contemporary social evils such as the corruption of judges or the disastrous consequences of enclosures and made himself a few enemies in the process, especially in country parishes.

As early as 1548, several foreign theologians who had been invited to stay in England by Archbishop Cranmer made their own contribution to the incipient Reformation of the English Church: The Italian Peter Martyr Vermigli was appointed Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, the German reformer Martin Bucer (who obtained a similar position at Cambridge) influenced the Ordinal published in 1550, while the Polish Calvinist John Laski left his imprint on the second edition of the Prayer Book published in 1552. This shows if need be that the English Reformation, far from being a purely indigenous affair, was shaped by foreign influences in the context of a wider European movement.

No sooner had Somerset seized the reins of power than the Six Articles of 1539 and all anti-heretic laws were abolished, and the Parliament restored lay communion under both kinds while sanctioning all forms of irreverence against the Eucharist. Moreover, the royal injunctions of 1547 required each parish to purchase an English copy of Erasmus' *Paraphrases* as well as the *Book of Homilies*, a book written in part by Cranmer who had not been able to publish it under Henry's reign. The injunctions, which were primarily aimed at fighting superstition, also required that the Epistles and the Gospel be read in English and that churches be rid of all images that aroused undue worship. This last point, which was confirmed by an act of Parliament in 1550, marked the beginning of a wave of iconoclasm resulting in the destruction (or sale) throughout the country of thousands of church windows, statues,

¹ *The Anglican Library*: <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/latimer/card/sermon06.htm> (accessed September 4, 2014).

paintings, crucifixes and other church ornaments—the loss of an invaluable artistic heritage in other words.² 1547 was also marked by the dissolution of chantries, a measure that Henry VIII had envisaged at the end of his reign to ease the financial strain on the Exchequer.³

The next two years saw the introduction of liturgical changes that had long been wanted by Cranmer. The Order of Communion was published in March 1548; it confirmed communion under both kinds and required that prayers in English be inserted in what essentially remained a Latin mass. Although these were only transitional measures that did not fundamentally challenge the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, they provoked the anger of the Henrician bishops Bonner and Gardiner whose opposition to reform quickly resulted in their imprisonment. A further step towards a radical Reformation of the Church was made with the publication in 1549 of the first Book of Common Prayer (or Prayer Book), the use of which became compulsory in January with the passing of an Act of Uniformity that had not been submitted to Convocation. This Prayer Book, whose main author was Cranmer, was written in English and replaced the liturgical books so far in use, i.e. the Missal, the Breviary and the Ritual. Liturgy was simplified along Lutheran lines, but the influence of Bucer, who was then trying to reconcile Lutherans and Zwinglians, shows through.⁴ Despite its strong Protestant overtones, the Prayer Book was just a skilful compromise: even if the Eucharist was presented more as a commemoration than a sacrifice, Catholic terminology and the word “mass” in particular, had not been entirely removed. Such measures could naturally appease neither the conservatives nor the most radical Protestants who, the same year, were nevertheless gratified with the passing of a law permitting priests to marry. Although the adoption of the Prayer Book in the country went all in all rather smoothly, there were a few uprisings in the South-

² If with the translation of the Bible the Reformation is likely to have accelerated the rise of literacy in England, one might not unreasonably argue that on the other hand iconoclasm put a brake on the development of the visual arts.

³ Apparently, Henry had also considered dissolving the two universities, but was dissuaded from doing so by his last wife Catherine Parr.

⁴ Although Luther did not subscribe to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, he believed in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the two kinds being at once bread and wine, and the body and blood of Christ (the term “consubstantiation” was later used to describe that doctrine). By contrast, the Swiss reformer Zwingli (1484-1531) rejected all notions of sacrifice and believed the Holy Communion was only a commemoration of Christ’s death, the two kinds—bread and wine—being mere symbols of his presence. A crucial debate among Reformers then bore on the interpretation of Christ’s words, “this is my body” which, for Zwingli, could only mean “this represents my body.”

West (Devon and Cornwall) where local populations had for the most part remained attached to the old liturgy. The rebellion was drowned in blood by mercenary troops quickly sent by the Regency Council. Somerset, who was now confronted with the dissatisfaction of all religious parties, strong opposition to his attempts to curb enclosures as well as with a peasants' revolt in Norfolk, was removed from power in October 1549 before being beheaded in 1552 on a charge of treason.

Often depicted as a starry-eyed idealist, the Protector was replaced by the more opportunistic Warwick, Duke of Northumberland, who after giving Catholics hopes of a return to orthodoxy, lost no time in pursuing the reformation initiated by his unfortunate rival. The year 1550 saw the publication of the Ordinal, a book devoted to ordination rites that bore the mark of Bucer, in which the priest (the word is still used despite its Catholic associations) is no longer presented as the minister of a sacrifice, but as the minister of God's word. This new step towards Protestantism provoked the en masse resignations of bishops who had remained faithful to the old religion and were replaced by (sometimes radical) Protestants like Nicholas Ridley or John Hooper. Ridley, who could not stand the slightest whiff of superstition, went as far as encouraging iconoclasm in his diocese and gave orders for the altar, which was too suggestive of a sacrifice, to be replaced in every church by a simple communion table around which the faithful would gather during Holy Communion.⁵ As for Hooper, who is often regarded as the father of Nonconformity, he was a Puritan who refused to wear liturgical garments—the cope and the surplice—on the ground that their use was not sanctioned by the Gospel.

Calvin's growing influence on Cranmer during Edward VI's reign, which can be felt in the Prayer Book of 1552, has often been noted. Indeed, the Geneva reformer corresponded not only with Somerset, whom he exhorted to extirpate all Catholic abuses, but also with the young king who seems to have been receptive to his teaching. He similarly enjoined Cranmer to root out what was left of Papism in England and their correspondence reveals that the English archbishop, who thought highly of him, was heedful of his advice.⁶ The authors of the second Prayer Book

⁵ This was obviously a way of symbolically removing a barrier between the minister and the communicants. In the Protestant tradition, indeed, the function of the minister is so to speak desacralized, and he no longer enjoys a status that elevates him above the faithful. What distinguishes him from the laity is only his skills as a theologian which allow him to teach the word of God better than anyone.

⁶ See on this point E. G. Léonard, *Histoire générale du protestantisme*, vol. II (Paris: PUF, 1988), 51.