The Henrician Reformation and the Emergence of the Modern British State

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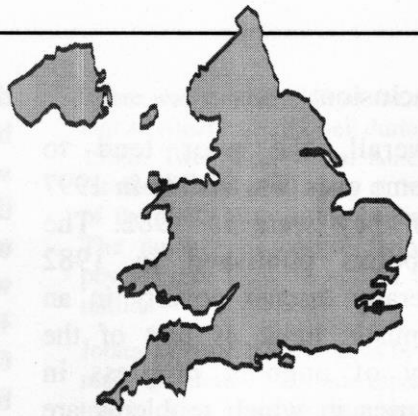

"At any one time," asserts Christopher Haigh, voicing the revisionist explanation of the apparent ease with which the Tudor Reformation was enacted, "there was not much Reformation to accept, and England accepted its Reformation because it didn't quite see what it was doing." The waters of the traditional Whig history of the Henrician break with Rome, in which the irresistible force of popular anti-clericalism triumphantly carried England off in the direction of Protestantism, progress and the Glorious Revolution a century and a half later, have been considerably muddied over the last fifty years. The last authoritative historian of the period who might reasonably be styled "Whiggish" was indeed A. G. Dickens, whose *English Reformation* (1964) remains respected but has long been widely considered to be mistaken in its confident assumptions that English Protestantism was embryonic in the populace at large before the 1530s in a form dating back to the fourteenth century teachings of John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384) and to his followers from around 1380, the so-called "Lollards." Haigh's *The English Reformation Revised* was published in 1987, but as early as 1972, in his *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*, G. R. Elton had made explicit a recurrent theme of his previous authoritative works, namely that the English Reformation was imposed from the top down. Where Haigh and like-minded historians have gone further than Elton is in questioning whether the Reformation was successfully imposed at all during the reign of Henry VIII (1519-1547), or even that of the explicitly Protestant Edward VI (1547-1553), arguing that the Catholic Marian reaction of 1553-1558 reinstated Catholicism with relative ease and that only Mary's childless death of natural causes after only six years of reign sealed Catholicism's fate in England.

Ensuing debate in this direction has necessarily concerned detailed analysis of such evidence as contemporary parish records away from the centres of power, the willingness of plaintiffs to accept ecclesiastical court judgements before and after the attacks upon the Church as of 1529, and so on, in order to obtain a measure of what genuine popular sentiment was. However, whether such considerations should fundamentally alter the view we have of the development of first modern England, and then modern Britain, remains to be seen. Arguably, only if we assume that sincere theological opinion in one direction or another among the populace at large is the *primum mobile* of historical change should we accept Haigh's second major postulate: that the ebbs and flows of the Reformation's influence in the sixteenth century were largely contingent and unpredictable, and (so the argument would seem to go) that long-term historical change follows no particular pattern. Whiggish tendencies in historical interpretation can be characterised as influenced to some extent by any or all of the following views: that Protestantism caused change; that it did so because it was theologically and morally superior to a corrupt Catholic church; that the change in question was better for everybody. There is a difference between, on the one hand, rejecting such assumptions and, on the other hand, seeing no pattern at all.

One pattern worthy of discussion is what could be posited as

follows: that, during the sixteenth century, centralised authorities in England increasingly organised national territory as "national," so that it could serve as a unified internal market for growing mercantile interests. These interests would later, in the events of 1688-89, obtain the diffusion of power from the monarchy and the nobility into a wider oligarchy represented in parliament, within a constitutional monarchy. They would then, from the early seventeenth century onward, ally with growing industrial interests and ultimately obtain the re-adjustment of power-sharing embodied by the Reform Act of 1832, radically increasing the institutionally recognised strength of capital-based wealth as opposed to land-based wealth. These are very large brush-strokes to say the least, and exactly when and how other interests began to make timid in-roads on aristocratic power during the sixteenth century can be debated, but viewing history in terms of processes of long-term power transactions still seems valid. From this point of view, at least four aspects of the Henrician break with Rome are still largely considered to have been critical for the long-term destiny of England and then of Britain as a state as we know it today: the particular origins and nature of Anglicanism as a national church, Thomas Cromwell's dissolution of the monasteries from 1536-1539, the role that the Privy Council took on during Cromwell's period as Henry's senior minister, and the role of the parliament and the concept of "king in parliament" posited at the time by the lawyer Christopher St-German.

The Henrician reformation has a convenient date giving it the illusory appearance of an "event," that of December 1534, when a short bill of little more than 300 words summed up and vigorously re-asserted the essence of the statutory measures of the previous five years. The Act of Supremacy, established that

> [...] it be enacted by authority of this present Parliament, that the King our Sovereign Lord, his heirs and successors, kings of this realms, shall be taken, accepted, and reputed the only Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England, called *Anglicana Ecclesia*, and shall have and enjoy, annexed and united to the imperial crown of this realm, as well the style and title thereof, as all honours, dignities, pre-eminences, jurisdictions, privileges, authorities, immunities, profits, and commodities, to the said dignity of Supreme Head of the same Church belonging and appertaining [...]

The clarity of this apparent sword-stroke cutting England off from papal authority hides however a much more complex reality. The elements of opportunism, political manoeuvre, international circumstances, and generally mixed motives involved in the Henrician reformation's chain of events are well-known and recent historians have tended to be cautious about its protagonists' understanding of exactly where they were going at any given time — with exceptions: Glyn Redworth, for example, in his article "Whatever Happened to the English Reformation," made the case that Henry himself had a coherent idea of the settlement he wanted and steered events to a larger degree than has been previously recognised. The term "Protestant" itself is problematic since Martin Luther had only written the famous letter to his superiors including his 95 theses in 1517, and the terminological opposition between "Protestant" and "Catholic" only emerged during the Council of Trent, convened by Paul III in 1545 and in session with interruptions until 1563. It is often used anyway (as it will be here), but as shorthand which must be understood with reservations — concretely, for example, concerning the fact that of the loosely-termed "Protestant" figures of the period, only those known, and persecuted, as Sacramentarians, openly accepted Luther's rejection of transubstantiation (the doctrine that the bread and wine of the Eucharist literally became the flesh and blood of Christ during the ceremony).

To attempt to summarise the most consensual elements of the known chain of events, Henry was obsessed with what he saw as the absolute necessity of having a son, and his marriage with Catharine of Aragon had been childless with the single exception of the birth of the future Mary I in 1516. He saw the absence of a male heir as a threat to his dynasty and to the stability of the realm. The idea that his father Henry VII's victory over

Richard III at Bosworth Field in 1485 had put an end to the Wars of the Roses and brought peace and prosperity back to England was and would continue to be in any case a staple of Tudor propaganda. These were the terms in which Henry thought, and in around 1527, by which time he had concluded that his marriage was disapproved of by God, Catharine (1485-1536) was 42, making matters unlikely to change.

Henry was however by no means personally disposed to embrace the new Lutheran, and by 1527 also Zwinglian ideas (Zwingli's *De vera et falsa religione commentarius* of 1525 went even further than Luther's positions). Ironically, he had earned the title "Defender of the Faith" which would be (and still is, even to this day) associated with the supremacy, from Pope Leo X, for his *Assertio septem sacramentorum adversus Martinum Lutherum*, published in 1521. In it Henry defended the seven sacraments of baptism, penance (confession), confirmation, the Eucharist, holy orders (the existence and role of monks and nuns), matrimony, and the anointment of the dying (the last rites) against Luther's assertion that only two (baptism and the Eucharist) were valid, since only these two were specifically sanctioned by Scripture. And although early English Protestantism became useful to Henry (just as he became useful to early English Protestantism), he never radically departed from his basically conservative tastes in religion, tolerating measured innovation perhaps in particular political circumstances, but swinging the tiller back in others. If Henry's religious thought evolved substantially at all, his ultimate position might seem at most to have reached that of the necessity of religious toleration, as his address to parliament on 24 December 1545 suggests. Even this needs to be qualified. What might be seen as Henry's moderation after 1540 may have saved Archbishop Thomas Cranmer from the conservative Stephen Gardiner's attempts to remove him in 1543. And it may have protected his last wife Catherine Parr, a Protestant sympathiser, from machinations against her in 1546, but it famously did not save Parr's friend Anne Askew from being burnt as a heretic in the same context.

The precise character of the establishment of *Anglicana Ecclesia*, then, might seem in its origins to be somewhat unsubstantial and purely contingent. A number of factors nonetheless gave the early Anglican Church a certain Protestant colouring. One was that the woman Henry was in love with in the late 1530s and wanted as his wife, Anne Boleyn, seems to have had distinct and genuine evangelical sympathies. Anne's opinions and role in this respect have been more clearly understood over recent years, and Eric Ives' recent *Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (2004) has clarified matters further. The British Library possesses a copy of William Tynedale's 1534 English translation of the New Testament known to have been Anne Boleyn's, and which moreover seems to have been a presentation copy, at a time when possessing any copy of it at all was still illegal in England. In her short time as queen between June 1533 and May 1536, Anne's patronage furthered the careers of such reformist preachers as Hugh Latimer (c. 1485-1555), and Nicolas Shaxton (1485?-1556), who in 1535 became respectively Bishop of Worcester and Bishop of Salisbury. In a letter from Shaxton to Cromwell in 1536, after the fall and execution of Anne, Shaxton begged Cromwell to be as assiduous in advancing "the honour of God and his Holy Word [as] when the late queen was alive and often incited you thereto" (*Letters And Papers, Foreign And Domestic, Of The Reign Of Henry VIII,* ed. J. S. Brewer et al, 1862-1932, x.942). Anne seems to have applauded such violently anti-clerical works as Simon Fish's *Supplication for the Beggars* (1529) and Tynedale's *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), to which she apparently drew Henry's attention.

This raises the second factor in the Protestant dimension of the Anglican Church as it was founded. Anne's influence

concerning Tynedale must have been all the easier to exert as, precisely, Henry had a keen interest in, amongst other things, Tynedale's emphasis on the authority of scripture. It so happened that early Protestant emphasis on the Bible itself as the only legitimate source of doctrine was useful to Henry in his attempts to rid himself of his first wife, since he had discovered a passage of Leviticus (20: 21), which seemed to prove that he should never have been allowed to marry his brother Arthur's widow ("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"). If there is one dimension of reformist thinking which Henry seems to have integrated in a lasting way, it may be this emphasis. The paradoxes of his position were revealed in the November 1538 heresy trial of John Lambert, who, as a Sacramentarian, followed Luther's denial of transubstantiation. Henry participated personally in the prosecution of Lambert, and the accused was duly burnt as a heretic, but the king notably had recourse to the authority of scripture to press the case, remonstrating "Mark well! for now thou shalt be condemned even by Christ's own words: 'Hoc est corpus meum.' " (Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, quoted in John Guy, *Tudor England*, 1988, 184).

It is perhaps unsurprising then that, amongst early Protestant notions, that of personal access to scripture made headway under Henry, at least in the advancement of the corollary emphasis on making the Bible available in the vernacular. The introduction of the English Bible is to a large extent the political achievement of Thomas Cromwell, but it is to be doubted given the extent to which Cromwell showed restraint on other matters that he could press ahead so energetically on this one had the king not supported him. And press ahead he did. It is sometimes suggested that the requirement in his 1538 Injunctions for an English Bible to be placed in each church amounted to patently ineffectual top-down directives mainly designed to curry favour with German Lutheran princes, but Cromwell's personal dedication to its application was strikingly fervent for someone sometimes characterised as a cynical and ruthless opportunist. The basic outline of events is as follows. In 1525, William Tynedale published, from Antwerp, an English translation of the New Testament and of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament). It circulated in England sufficiently widely for it to be perceived as a threat and burnt publicly. It was seen by the church authorities as heretical in itself but also questionable as a translation on many points; in any case, the translation was accompanied by highly partisan Lutheran margin notes which made it an unlikely candidate for any consensual transition. Tynedale's translation was never authorised under his own sulphurous name during the period, but his associate Miles Coverdale made the first complete English translation of the Bible partly re-using the 1525 text, legally and with Cromwell's support, in 1535. In 1537 John Rogers produced the first complete translation with explicit royal approval (but still with the precaution of the pseudonym "Thomas Mathew" — hence the "Mathew Bible" bequeathed to posterity). Most important, he printed 1,500 copies of it. This was still a long way from 8,445, the number of parishes in England that would need copies for Cromwell's 1538 Injunctions to be applied, but he invested his own money in another edition. This would become known as the "Great Bible" or the "Cromwell Bible," again with the essential participation of Coverdale. It was printed firstly in Paris for technological reasons, then continued in London because of the Inquisition's activities in France. Cromwell pointedly reduced the price per copy, negotiated the return of two and a half thousand copies from Paris, and in the darkening twilight of his own personal fortunes in 1540 was still overseeing the printing of another three thousand. It was finally enough to make the 1538 Injunctions applicable, although it would still be another five years or so before even most of the rural parishes throughout the country had a copy. Given the cost of a single Bible — 10 shillings even after Cromwell's reduction, or around two-thirds of the monthly wage of a typical skilled worker

such as a carpenter — this does not seem such a slow process as has sometimes been implied.

Whatever the actual impact of this official diffusion of the English Bible, the dominant classes of the period seem to have quickly come to fear that it implied individual interpretation and might encourage dissension that might start with religious doctrine and then lead to questioning of the social hierarchy in general. Although in the religiously conservative years of the 1540s Henry continued to command that the Lord's Prayer be read in church and that Scripture be emphasized at the pulpit, the Act for the Advancement of True Religion of 1543, three years after Cromwell's execution, concentrated on severely limiting who was authorized to read the Bible themselves. It specified that "no women nor artificers, [ap]prentices, journeymen, serving men of the degrees of yeomen or under, husbandmen nor labourers" were to do so, since subjects "of the lower sort" had "increased in divers naughty and erroneous opinions, and by occasion thereof fallen into great dissension among themselves" (S. E. Lehmberg, *The Later Parliaments of Henry VIII, 1536-1547,* Cambridge, 1977, 186-8).

Of course as Protestantism at large consolidated its position, the Anglican Church would in time move a little further along towards the evangelical end of the doctrinal spectrum. Yet to a large extent the paradoxes of the new *Anglicana Ecclesia* in its early years were only apparent and were in fact part of a logic whose coherence would largely define Anglicanism for centuries to come. The role of the English language was natural, for this was a national church, an instrument to forge national identity, to unify jurisdictions, to eliminate the rival authority of the independent church, and to symbolise and transmit centralised power. In a sense, the first and second Books of Common Prayer (1549 and 1552 respectively), generally seen to be unambiguously Protestant, and so in some sense more individualistic and resistant to institutionalisation, go in fact even further down the road of a national organisation of spiritual life. It is a simplification to assert that Anglicanism was and is Catholicism without the Pope. It is however reasonable to say that its national dimension went hand in hand with an insistence on hierarchy, ritual, and institutionalised control of hearts and minds. What is striking is the way in which this national church could adapt itself or be adapted to be the ecclesiastical vehicle of what can be described as Tudor absolutism just as it could later for the oligarchic order of eighteenth century constitutional monarchy (the pre-Glorious Revolution seventeenth century is admittedly more complicated). As long as the construction and the maintenance of what historians call the Nation-State was central to the economic functioning of the territory, and as long as spirituality and religion as such remained decisive structuring principles in thinking, Anglicanism retained its place as the ecclesiastical expression and support of the existing order. Only perhaps — but this is speculative — in contemporary Britain, in a context in which power has shifted out of local hierarchies to a large extent towards international capital, in which the role of the Nation-State has receded, and in which spirituality in a secular age has had to redefine itself, has Anglicanism paradoxically been able to open up debate on certain issues (for example, homosexuality) with more freedom than other more ideologically partisan religious movements.

In the context of the Henrician break with Rome, the Anglican Church comes over as one instrument among others to organise the English territory as national. In terms of jurisdictional unity, up until 1532 the church had existed as a separate and autonomous entity with its own courts, its own parliament — parliaments, to be more precise, but the Convocation of York tended to follow the decisions of the Convocation of Canterbury — and of course supranational allegiance to an external hierarchy, that headed by the Pope. More than perhaps the Act of Supremacy itself in 1534, which was effectively statutory "tidying up," the decisive step of the break with Rome was thus the Submission of the Clergy on 15

May 1532, when the Convocation of Canterbury accepted to withdraw the proviso "as far as the law of Christ allows" from their earlier admission that Henry was their "singular protector, only and supreme lord, and as far as the law of Christ allows, supreme head of the church." Thomas More, in any case, understood exactly how decisive the Submission was and, as a staunch defender of the independence of the Church, resigned from the Lord Chancellorship the next day.

It is characteristic that this manoeuvre by the king and parliament seems to have been largely the work of Thomas Cromwell, who in all likelihood drafted the text of the "Supplication against the Ordinaries" of 18 March, and to which Convocation was answering on 15 May. More than any other individual figure of the period, Cromwell was the means through which the institutional adjustments of the period were made. His rise to prominence in itself incarnated change: the principal minister of the king was now no longer a clergyman or a nobleman but a lawyer and parliamentarian, whose methodical and meticulous working style contributed to the professionalisation of government as it gradually took on roles beyond those of mere legal arbiter and war-maker, moving towards the prerogatives of complex territorial administration. Even at the time, the aristocratic rebels involved in the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace recognised at least part of this, when they expressed their resentment of the concentration of power in the Privy Council as opposed to the larger and looser king's council. The latter had embodied the principle of *consiliarii nati*, by which the monarch was supposed to share power with those born of appropriate rank. The compact and efficient Privy Council as it emerged under Cromwell was clearly nothing to do with this kind of power-sharing between the nobles and the monarch they accepted as arbitrator: it was the executive branch of government of modern political theory, and it is in this sense that most historians see the Henrician Privy Council as the forerunner of the eighteenth century cabinet. It was this change in the spirit of the institutions that the nobles of the Pilgrimage detected and opposed as much as the mere presence of commoners such as Cromwell in positions of great power. They were not the only ones, and what they could not achieve because of their opposition to a dissolution of the monasteries wanted by the king, Norfolk and his allies would attain in destroying Cromwell in 1540.

Before that time came, Cromwell legitimised Henry's supremacy over the church (and marriage to Anne Boleyn) through repeated use of statute in a way which contributed to strengthen the parliament in the long run. Parliament was of course instrumental and subject to the king's will, but strong precedents were set in the 1530s, after the effective elimination of its rival the Convocation, to establish it as indispensable to the exercise of power, a potential stepping-stone to claiming the right to exercise power itself—a claim it would make in the next century. In opposition to arguments such as Thomas More's that no local legislature could have precedence over the church's liberties, Cromwell's collaborator and fellow lawyer Christopher Saint-German meanwhile theorised the authority of the king as precisely based upon the principle of popular assent through parliament. Coining a phrase which was to be repeated in countless textbooks on constitutional history, Saint-German argued that "the king in parliament" was "the high sovereign over the people which hath not only charge on the bodies but also on the souls of his subjects" (Saint-German, *Doctor and Student*, 1530; Selden Society, 1974, 327). This authority was the platform from which an increasingly centralised state stewarded by Cromwell progressively organised itself. The dissolution of the monasteries from 1536 to 1540 re-endowed the Crown financially to enable it to wield its authority effectively—although Cromwell's apparent intention that rent from the reappropriated lands make this re-endowment permanent was ignored in the 1540s as Henry's largely pointless wars with France required estate after estate to be sold. Through the last session of the Reformation Parliament

(1536) Cromwell had the marcher lordships of the ambiguously associated Wales dissolved and replaced them with shires, each of which was to be represented in parliament, added four counties on the same basis, granted equal citizenship to the Welsh and annexed the country definitively.

Cromwell's injunctions of 1538 are striking not only because of their extension of the role of the English language in the state's institutions, an authorised English Bible symbolising the unification of nation, state, and church, but almost incongruously for anyone who tries to read them uniquely in terms of religion, also include as their twelfth item the following requirement:

> Item, that you and every parson, vicar or curate within this diocese shall for every church keep one book or register, wherein ye shall write the day and year of every wedding, christening and burying made within you parish for your time, and so every man succeeding you likewise; and also there insert every person's name that shall be so wedded, christened or buried; and for the safe keeping of the same book, the parish shall be bound to provide of their common charges one sure coffer with two locks and keys, whereof the one to remain with you, and the other with the wardens of every such parish wherein the said book shall be laid up; which book you shall every Sunday take forth and in the presence of the said wardens, or one of them, write and record in the same all the weddings, christenings and buryings made the whole week before, and that done, to lay up the book in the said coffer as before; and for every time that the same shall be omitted, the party that shall be in the fault thereof shall forfeit to the said church three shillings and fourpence, to be employed on the reparation of the same church.

Although the system would not be fully applied until the reign of Edward VI, this was the introduction of the parish register. Almost as soon as the Church of England was born, then, it was put to administrative use, at least in Cromwell's plans, for the compilation of statistics of the same rigour as those Cromwell had gathered in the *Valor ecclesiasticus* of 1535 prior to the dissolution, but this time as part of an increasingly wide understanding of the state's field of activity and of what needed to be known for that activity. It seems no coincidence that in addition to his contribution to legitimising the king's, or the king-in-parliament's supremacy, Christopher Saint-German had drafted extensive legislation in 1531 proposing measures including gathering data about wage-levels and the use of public works to provide employment for vagabonds and beggars. It did not become law, but pushed back the boundaries of what was conceivable. In this perspective, such matters as grassroots support for Protestantism are not unimportant, but can only be given limited significance in a process of historical change in which religious doctrine ultimately plays an auxiliary role.

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