

The Reformation in England 2: Protestantism in the Ascendancy and Protestantism in Danger

The death of Henry VIII on 28 January 1547 liberated Thomas Cranmer to pursue Protestant reform more fully. R. Tudur Jones comments that Cranmer 'accepted high office with reluctance but his wide scholarship, his appreciation of the value of tradition and his sensitive appreciation of the value of tradition and his sensitive spirituality made him a church leader of rare quality. And in his personal relationships he was gentle and magnanimous'.¹ He had been present when the king died, clutching the regal hand as the king confirmed he trusted Christ for his salvation. Now he was able to come into his own. Along with a number of influential aids to the new king, he gradually tried to secure the wholesale Protestantisation of England.

The new king, Edward VI, was only nine years old when he acceded to the throne. As he never reached the age of majority, the country was ruled by a Regency Council, led first by his uncle Edward Seymour (c.1500-52), 1st Duke of Somerset, (leader of council 1547-49), and then by John Dudley (c.1502-53), 1st Earl of Warwick and, from 1551, Duke of Northumberland (leader of the council 1549-53). Somerset had his strengths, but he fell foul of ambitious enemies at Court, particularly Dudley. Although part of the Regency Council following Dudley's rise to power, he was arraigned for plotting against Dudley and he went to his death on Tower Hill on 22 January 1552. Despite being Edward's uncle, the king noted in his Journal only that 'the duke of Somerset had his head cut off upon Tower Hill between eight and nine o'clock in the morning'. Dudley was more scheming. He knew that when Edward died his own position was in danger. He sought to secure the accession of Lady Jane Grey, his daughter in law who had some claim on the throne, but circumstances conspired against him and he followed Seymour to the executioner's block on 22 August 1553 having recanted his Protestantism the previous day. Lady Jane Grey followed on 12 February 1554.

Attempts were made to hail Edward as a new 'Josiah' after the Old Testament king who acceded to the throne at the age of eight and was able to instigate many reforms in the kingdom of Judah. In his coronation sermon, Cranmer had said:

Your majesty is God's vicegerent, and Christ's vicar within your own dominions, to see, with your predecessor Josiah, God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed. These acts be the sign of a second Josiah, who reformed the church of God in his days.²

The image was reinforced by Hugh Latimer (c.1487-1555), a committed Protestant who had been bishop of Worcester under Henry VIII, but fell out of favour and was imprisoned in the Tower when he opposed the Six Articles. He

¹ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 119.

² Quoted in p. 228.

became Court preacher under Edward and, in April 1549, he reminded his audience that 'Josiah reformed his father's ways, who walked in idolatry'. In the meantime, no lesser figure than John Calvin had written to Somerset, on 22 October 1548, saying 'seeing that God has brought you so far, take order ... that He may approve you as a repairer of his temple, so that the times of the King your nephew may be compared with those of Josiah ...'³

In 1547, the Six Articles were repealed as were the laws against heresy, while shrines and images and 'all other monuments of feigned miracles' were ordered to be removed from churches. Also some 2,374 Chantries (monetary funds, often endowed with lands, established to say masses for the dead) were dissolved.

Throughout Edward's brief reign, Calvin and Bullinger became increasingly influential and England's reformers remained in contact with them over the following years, ensuring that the English Reformation abandoned its compromise with Lutheran teaching and became increasingly Calvinistic in doctrine. By 1548, there were a number of continental Reformed theologians living in England, including Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), who was Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, 1547-1553, John à Lasco (1499-1560), minister of the Stranger's Church, London, 1550-3, Bernardino Ochino (1487-1564), a prebendary of Canterbury, and Martin Bucer (1491-1551), Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, 1549-51. Cranmer also tried to persuade Calvin and Bullinger to come, though they refused.

On 8 March 1548, Cranmer published an order for Communion thus bringing Protestant teaching to the churches. By the end of the year, thirteen theologians, including Vermigli and Bucer, were working on a book of services which was approved by Parliament in January 1549. The Book of Common Prayer was ordered to be used in English churches from 9 June 1549. The Book was in some senses a compromise. It was based partly on Catholic liturgies, especially the Sarum Rite, as well as on some contemporary Protestant liturgies. Its aim was not to alienate those sympathetic to Catholicism and to win the allegiance of those who believed in transubstantiation while also not offending those who sought Reform and followed the teachings of Geneva and Zürich. Its use was supported by the first of the English Acts of Uniformity. 'An Acte for the unyformytie of Service and Admyinstracion of the Sacramentes throughout the Realm' was in fact passed in 1548. It stressed that the only legal form of worship was contained in the Book of Common Prayer. Those who ignored the act were to be punished, for a first offence, by loss of earnings and six months imprisonment; a second offence would result in a year's imprisonment; a third offence would lead to life imprisonment. Some considered that the Act was relatively liberal because it did not enforce attendance at Church.

In May 1550, Cranmer published his Ordinal which 'quietly but significantly redefined the role of the minister'. The charge to the minister was 'Take thou authority to preach the Word of God and to minister the holy sacraments in this congregation'. Calvinist influence was clear. The minister 'was no longer to be a

³ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 157.

sacrificing priest but a servant of the Word of God who also ministered the sacraments'.⁴

The Book of Common Prayer was revised in 1552. The word 'Mass' was completely abandoned as were the ideas of sacrifice and of transubstantiation. A more Reformed view was introduced emphasizing commemoration and thanksgiving. In fact, the order for the Eucharist appeared to adopt Zwinglian memorialism rather than a sense of the real presence in the meal: 'Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee'. Parliament passed it in March and introduced a new Act of Uniformity in order to ensure compliance. There followed the 'Great Prayer Book Rebellion' in the south-west, a protest largely prompted not simply by the abandonment of the faith of the fathers, but by the attempt to destroy it and banish it completely from the land. It was quickly put down. In June 1553, Cranmer published the 42 Articles of Religion which was the first comprehensive attempt to define the faith and order of the Church of England.

Edward's reign was clearly Protestant and, despite his youth, Edward enthusiastically supported the reforms. The arrival of the continental Reformers seems to have driven attempts at a more radical reformation, along with a number of native clergy such as John Hooper (c.1495-1555). Hooper was offered the bishopric of Gloucester in 1550 and refused to be consecrated according to the new Ordinal. He sought the total eradication of any remnants of the church of Rome and he attacked the use of vestments. In turn, Ridley and Cranmer condemned this 'because of the challenge which they posed to uniformity and the supremacy of secular powers in determining the nature of the church'.⁵ Bullinger at least was disappointed when Hooper compromised and agreed to his consecration.

Reform was precarious. Henry had not been totally committed and seemed keener to retain regal prerogative over spiritual and temporal matters. Edward was too young to make any real impact, despite the reforms undertaken during his reign, and much debate ensued as to whether these reforms could be enacted in the name of a minor. By 1553, the king's health – never robust – deteriorated and on 6 July 1553 he succumbed to the consumption which had been weakening him over the preceding months. He had decreed that neither Mary nor Elizabeth could succeed him as he considered both to be illegitimate. A brief and tragic dalliance ensued with Lady Jane Grey as queen (in a plot certainly hatched by Dudley; it is unclear as to whether Edward had any part in it, as Dudley claimed), but ultimately it was the Catholic Mary who would occupy the throne.

Marian Reaction

Initially it seemed that Mary was not keen to enforce a new conformity to Rome with indecent haste. A royal proclamation in August 1553 declared that there

⁴ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 160.

⁵ Helen Parish, 'England', in Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 229.

would be no pursuit of conformity, but it also recognized 'evil disposed persons' who had been at the heart of the previous reforms. Cranmer and other leading Protestants were imprisoned and foreign Protestants were advised to leave the realm. From October 1553, parliament (and it is significant that Mary had to work through parliament, such was the legacy of Thomas Cromwell) set about dismantling reform, with married clergy being the first focus of this counter-reformation. Injunctions in 1553-4 ordered that married clergy were to be deprived of their livings, a decree which potentially affected two thousand of them. Heresy laws were reintroduced and the Protestant legislation effected under Edward was repealed. However, against Mary's wishes, parliament steadfastly refused to reintroduce papal supremacy.

From February 1555 a harder attitude was adopted. Beginning with the execution at Smithfield of John Rogers, Bible translator, at least 280 men and women were to die as a result of the increased persecution of Protestants. R. Tudur Jones comments that 'The vast majority of them, no less than 83% were executed at four places, Norwich (31), Chichester (41), Canterbury (49) and London (112) – a total of 233'.⁶ The papal legate, Reginald Pole (1500-58, son of Lady Margaret Pole, executed on a trumped-up charge of treason by Henry VIII in a particularly brutal way) was able to return from exile and he became Archbishop of Canterbury 22 March 1556 (Cranmer was deposed on 13 November 1555, the delay was caused by the fact that Pole had never been ordained priest, despite having been made Cardinal in 1536). Pole bears some responsibility for the persecution of Protestants, though there is evidence of clemency on his part. The blame lies primarily with Mary and her husband, the Spanish prince Philip. They were perhaps too keen to see heretics burn, but they were ably supported and encouraged to do so by Mary's trusted Lord Chancellor, Stephen Gardiner (c.1483-1555), formerly bishop of Winchester, and Edmund Bonner (c.1500-69) who was known as 'bloody Bonner' for his role in the Marian persecutions.

Mary clearly misunderstood feeling in the country. The vast majority of people had held firm, at least emotionally, to Catholic faith and practice, but they resented her marriage to a Spaniard, the disastrous war with France which saw Calais lost and which Mary had declared in support of Philip, and, perhaps more than anything else, the brutal way with which she sought to eradicate Protestantism and sought drastic revenge on basically loyal and decent men.

Hugh Latimer (c.1487-1555), once bishop of Worcester and Chaplain to Edward VI, and Nicholas Ridley (c.1500-55), bishop of London 1550-53, were burned at the stake at Oxford on 16 October 1555. Latimer was an old man and not able to enter into debate with those appointed to question him, including Edmund Bonner (who was Ridley's successor as bishop of London) and Stephen Gardiner. Yet he is reputed to have said to Ridley on the day of their execution: 'Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out'.

⁶ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 164.

On 21 March 1556, Cranmer was burned at the stake in Oxford. He had made several recantations over the months, having spent two years in prison. He hoped that his life would be spared, but Mary could not forgive him for the part he played in her mother's divorce. She had said of him that 'his iniquity and obstinacy was so great against God and your Grace that your clemency and mercy could have no place with him' and despite the provision in Canon Law for the pardoning of heretics who recanted their heresy, she pressed for his execution. Cranmer regretted his lack of courage and conviction. He was permitted to preach at Christ Church, the authorities believing he was to make a final and public recantation. Instead, he withdrew his previous recantations and told the crowd that his right hand, which had signed the recantations, would perish first in the flames: 'and forasmuch as my hand offended, writing contrary to my heart, my hand shall first be punished there-fore; for may I come to the fire, it shall first be burned'. He was dragged from the pulpit and taken to the place of execution (where Latimer and Ridley had previously perished). He was true to his word and plunged his right hand into the flames.

Over eight hundred Protestants fled to the continent during the Marian persecution, landing in places such as Basel, Frankfurt, Strasbourg and Zürich, cities in which the Reformation had already taken hold. These exiles would have a significant effect on the Reformation after Mary's reign, though they returned with different views of how the Reformation should be pursued.

Far from re-establishing Catholicism, the burnings had the opposite affect. Less and less people attended the public burning of heretics, while more sympathy was aroused for the courageous way in which those condemned met their fate. When Mary died on 17 November 1558, there was widespread rejoicing, the people celebrating by the lighting of bonfires. In some respects her reign did more to secure a Protestant future than had the reign of her half-brother before her. Harry Reid comments:

Early English Protestantism had fed on a nasty anticlericalism. It has been identified with robbery, despoliation, the destruction of beauty, the crude ending of old and much-loved ways and rituals, and the greed of jumped-up and over-ambitious 'new men'. All this changed with the burnings. Protestantism now became seen as patriotic, as pro-English and anti-Spanish, as honest and decent.⁷

⁷ Harry Reid, *Reformation: The Dangerous Birth of the Modern World* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2009), p. 206.