

The Reformation in England 1: The Henrician Settlement

Possibly more so than in any other country in which reformation occurred, it was in England that the reform of the church was enacted legally and motivated by political concerns. As such, the reforms undertaken during the reign of Henry VIII gave rise to a new state order where, despite all appearances, power in fact would lie with parliament, though this would not become clear for another century. Reform was enacted by statute and designed with particular ends in view; there was always a certain compromise over faith and order. Protestantism itself, known in the early Tudor period as 'Lutheranism', was not the direct cause of the English Reformation and, at least initially, this meant that there was an unwillingness to establish a new church order based on patterns emerging in continental Europe. The result was a compromise. As Peter Marshall has noted, 'The English *Reformation* took several peculiar courses, and ended up, by accident, giving birth to a distinct variant of world Christianity: Anglicanism'.¹

There were movements in England which might have provided the motivation and energy for reform. The Lollards emerged as an underground movement in London, Kent, the West Country, the Midlands, the Thames valley and Yorkshire, where groups of ordinary people, with some clerical support, met to read the Bible, to pray and to discuss points of doctrine. The Lollards believed that all Christians were ministers. They rejected purgatory, images and pilgrimages, and opposed the sacrifice of the mass and the doctrine of transubstantiation. There was the inevitable clampdown: between 1508 and 1535 at least sixty Lollards were burned at the stake as heretics while others were branded.² But while they were certainly in the background, the Lollards did not bring about reform in England. Instead, the reform of the church in England was enacted because of Henry VIII's desire to secure the Tudor dynasty. Such a desire was natural given the upheavals of the Wars of the Roses which had come to an end within living memory. Everything revolved around the production of a male heir, and the reform movements in continental Europe provided a catalyst which enabled Henry to make his break with Rome when allegiance to the 'Old Faith' appeared to put insurmountable barriers to the resolution of his problem. Nevertheless, Henry sought to avoid any sense of dependence on those movements for theological, social, political and ecclesiastical justification for the break which led to the development of a church which was no longer fully Catholic, but was not either fully Protestant.

Consolidating the Tudor Dynasty

Henry was the third child and second son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. He had not received any regal instruction because there had been no thought that he would ever be king. His elder brother Arthur, prince of Wales (1486-1502), died suddenly on 2 April 1502 at the age of 15 and only twenty weeks after his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), effected in order to secure a

¹ Peter Marshall, 'England', in R. Ward Holder (ed.), *The Westminster Handbook to*

² R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Rformation: From Wyclif to Knox – Two Centuries that Changed the Course of History* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1980), p. 111.

treaty with Spain. Henry VII sought to confirm the alliance with Spain and promised his second son in marriage to Catherine. Though initially opposed, Henry finally agreed to the marriage following his father's death. Catherine gave birth to a stillborn child on 31 January 1510, a son on 1 January 1511, named Henry, who died seven weeks later. She miscarried in 1514, gave birth to a daughter, Mary, in February 1516, and miscarried again in 1518. Henry became increasingly desperate and, as was customary, he conducted numerous affairs, including one with Mary Boleyn (c.1499-1543), one of Catherine's ladies in waiting.

During this time Henry was considered to be an attractive, educated and cultured figure. He was an author and composer and, following the publication of his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (Defence of the Seven Sacraments) in 1521, Pope Leo X had declared him *Fedei Defensor*, i.e. Defender of the Faith. Quite when he decided against Catholicism – if indeed he ever did – is unclear. He certainly hated Luther and had no time for Lutheran teaching. But other events, rather than theological conviction, were conspiring to ensure that Henry would finally make the break with Rome.

By 1525, Henry had become infatuated with Anne (c.1501-36), sister of Mary Boleyn. The lack of a male heir was making him increasingly edgy, and he realized that he had three choices. He could seek to legitimize Henry FitzRoy (1519-36), his son by his mistress Elizabeth Blount (c.1499-1539/40). FitzRoy was the only illegitimate child that Henry recognized, though it is likely that he fathered a number of others. It was, perhaps, a cruel irony that he could be so prodigious with mistresses and yet so unfortunate with his legal wives. In fact, FitzRoy, of whom it seems Henry was particularly fond, predeceased his father, succumbing to 'consumption' (as would his half-brother Edward) when he was but 17 years of age. His second option was that he ensured that his daughter, Mary, married and gave issue before he died. He did not consider that this was a sufficiently secure a course of action. His final option was that he seek to annul his marriage to Catherine and marry someone of child-bearing age. This he decided to pursue, with far-reaching consequences.

Henry's Divorce

By 1527 Henry had become convinced that his marriage to Catherine had been contrary to scripture, specifically Leviticus 20.21: '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'. Henry appealed to the Pope to annul his marriage, and an investigation was convened in England by papal envoys. It is likely that the Pope had been influenced by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who was the queen's nephew, and it seems that he never intended to grant Henry a divorce. As a result, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (1473-1530), Henry's first minister, whom the king had tasked with securing papal approval of the annulment, fell from grace. In 1531, Henry banished Catherine from Court and gave her rooms to Anne Boleyn. Anne was highly intelligent and interested in Protestantism. Through her influence, and crucially for the future of religion in England, Thomas Cranmer became Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1532, Henry secretly married Anne with a second, more public marriage on 25 January 1533. On 23 May 1533

Cranmer presided over a special court which declared Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon to be null and void. On 28 May, he declared the validity of Henry's marriage to Anne. On 7 September Anne gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. In March 1534, Pope Clement VII eventually made his decision. He announced that Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn was invalid. Henry reacted by declaring that the Pope no longer had authority in England. In November 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy which declared that Henry VIII was now the Head of the Church of England. This led to the execution of Thomas More (1478-1535), Henry's Lord Chancellor from 1529, because he refused to take the Oath of Supremacy and to reject papal authority over the whole Church.

Anne was too intelligent, too feisty, and proved unwilling to be subservient to the king and his wishes. By Christmas 1534, Henry was seeking a way to divorce her. She miscarried a number of children while married to the king, most significantly a male child who was lost at the time the king suffered an accident while at tournament in January 1536. By that time he had a new mistress – Jane Seymour (1508-37). Accusations were made against Anne of adultery and incest, while Henry claimed he had been forced into marrying Anne through 'sortilege' ('deception' or 'spells'), though the evidence brought against her was unconvincing. The fact is that evidence mattered little. Henry had switched his attention – and affection – to another and Anne's fate was sealed. On 14 May, Cranmer announced that Henry's marriage to Anne was dissolved. The following day, she was tried for adultery, incest and high treason and she was executed on 19 May 1536.

The Henrician Reforms

While the continuation of the Tudor line through a male heir remained Henry's major concern, in order to pursue this it became necessary to reform the church in England. The reforms were enacted over time, and the way was prepared by theological debate. 'By about 1530', according to R. Tudur Jones, 'the idea was being circulated that the King of England by ancient prescription was directly responsible to God for the government of his realm as well as being guardian of the church. In other words, he possessed an ancient autonomy that had been undermined by the popes. The concept was to be the justification of much that followed'.³

Between 1532 and 1537, Henry enacted a number of statutes which contributed to the construction of the Church of England over which he would preside as 'Supreme Head'. These included:

- Act of Supplication against the Ordinaries (1532) and Act of Submission of the Clergy (1532) which instigated the royal supremacy over the church by enabling the crown to veto the church's legislation;
- The Ecclesiastical Licenses Act or the Act Concerning Peter's Pence and Dispensations (1532) declared that there was 'no superior under God' but Henry and made it illegal to make payments to Rome. It also enabled the award of Lambeth degrees as academic degrees;

³ R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 117.

- The Statute in Restraint of Appeals (1533) in which appeal to any court outside England was made illegal. As a result, clergy, for example, could not appeal to the Church and its canon law against any finding of an English court. In effect, appeal to the Pope was made illegal;
- Ecclesiastical Appointments Act (1534) which insisted that the clergy elect bishops nominated by the sovereign;
- Act of Succession (1534) required clergy to swear to the lawfulness of Henry's second marriage and declared that the royal succession was bound in issue from that marriage. (There were subsequent acts in 1536, which declared that the succession would be in the issue from his marriage to Jane Seymour. In July 1543 a third act restored Mary and Elizabeth to the succession after their half-brother Edward);
- Act of Supremacy (1534) in which the king was declared to be 'the only Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England'. Henry delegated much of this responsibility to his chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, when he designated him 'Vicar General' in January 1535;
- Treasons Act (1534) in which failure to recognize the king to be the Supreme Head of the Church was declared treasonable and punishable by death.

The arrangements that made Henry 'Supreme Head of the Church' gave him supreme authority over the clergy. Parallels were made with the biblical King David who held authority over the priests and the temple. As such, it was supposed, 'the Henrician Reformation was renovation rather than innovation, the restoration to the monarch of the authority usurped by the church'.⁴ For Henry, this was no theoretical authority and he sought to exercise it in a way that turned out to be arbitrary and at times simply cruel. Henry wanted to dictate the doctrine to be adopted by the church and demanded conformity, even though it was not always clear what he intended. Yet he suffered from what appeared to be serial indecisiveness, at once refusing to make a decision and apparently changing his mind.

From 1535, taxes previously paid to Rome were claimed by the Crown. Cromwell then undertook a massive survey of the Church's holdings. This ultimately led to the dissolution of the monasteries. In January 1536, all religious houses worth less than £200 were vested in the crown. A short time later, surviving houses were also transferred to the crown. By January 1540, all such houses – around eight hundred of them – had been dissolved.⁵ It brought around £90,000 a year to the Crown. This was a tactic designed to create a landed gentry, loyal to the Crown, who would bring new and efficient methods to working the land. Its affect was in some ways devastating. While the religious houses had become corrupt and desperately needed reform, they had also, in many areas, fulfilled necessary duties towards the poor, including the provision of rudimentary education. No alternative provision was made available. The buildings were

⁴ Helen Parish, 'England', in Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 225.

⁵ For details, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (2nd ed. New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 2005).

ransacked, the art and artifacts pillaged, and the riches appropriated by the Crown for personal and political ends. This was not the reformation of religion but its destruction in order to bring much needed revenue to the Crown. The break from Rome and the Henrician settlement had been effected in order to enable the king to divorce as well as to plunder the church's vast resources rather than through any deep-seated convictions about Protestantism. It was not England's, or Henry's, finest hour. Harry Reid comments:

In this respect, the English Reformation was different from the Scottish one which was to come a generation later. The Scottish Reformation placed much emphasis on education and social welfare. In suppressing the monasteries, indeed in smashing them to bits, Cromwell and his henchmen were destroying a vast, if ramshackle and corrupt and incompetent, system for the succour and support and occasional education of ordinary people.⁶

Reform Consolidated

In the early to mid 1530s, Henry seemed to be unstoppable. He had divorced Catherine and married Anne, only to have his scheme apparently thwarted by powers beyond his control, for Anne gave birth to a daughter. As time went by, he became more and more capricious and cruel. Two of his trusted aids, who had previously served him well, Bishop John Fisher and the intellectual anti-Lutheran Sir Thomas More, went to the executioner's block in 1535 because they could not, in all good conscience, deny papal supremacy. Perhaps in an attempt to appear balanced, Henry ordered the execution of fourteen Protestants at the same time. The truth of the matter is that he became increasingly despotic and unpredictable. Convinced of his role under God and driven by a blood lust fuelled by ill-health and bad temper, his reign, from the break with Rome, was nothing short of tyrannical.

There was an attempt to impose a theological settlement. The 'Articles devised by the King's Highness' Majesty to stablish Christian quietness and unity among us', or the 'Ten Articles' were agreed in 1536. Cranmer is the likely author, but they were presented as if they were devised by the King himself. Five Articles related to doctrine and five to ceremony in the church. They give a sense of where the English Church stood following the break with Rome, but they demonstrate, too, that continental reformation thought had not been wholly adopted.

Articles related to doctrine:

1. That Holy Scriptures and the three Creeds are the basis and summary of a true Christian faith.
2. That baptism conveys remission of sins and the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, and is absolutely necessary as well for children as adults.

⁶ Harry Reid, *Reformation: The Dangerous Birth of the Modern World* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2009), p. 82.

3. That penance consists of contrition, confession, and reformation, and is necessary to salvation.
4. That the body and blood of Christ are really present in the elements of the eucharist.
5. That justification is remission of sin and reconciliation to God by the merits of Christ; but good works are necessary.

Articles related to ceremony:

1. That images are useful as remembrancers, but are not objects of worship.
2. That saints are to be honored as examples of life, and as furthering our prayers.
3. That saints may be invoked as intercessors, and their holydays observed.
4. That ceremonies are to be observed for the sake of their mystical signification, and as conducive to devotion.
5. That prayers for the dead are good and useful, but the efficacy of papal pardon, and of soul-masses offered at certain localities, is negated.⁷

In 1537, Henry acted against the use of images and abolished the lesser saints' feasts because on the grounds that they had been advocating idleness, especially at Harvest time. During the same year, Cromwell ordered that every parish church in England should obtain a copy of the Bible in English, thus unleashing a thirst for literacy as the Reformation cry of *sola scriptura* began to be grasped by ordinary people in the parishes. This Bible was largely the work of William Tyndale (who had been hunted down by Henry's agents, tried and executed in 1536, Tyndale's final words reputedly being, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes') and comprised a New Testament and partially translated Old Testament, with the addition of other Old Testament books translated by John Rogers (c.1500-55), who would later become the first of the Marian martyrs. The English 'Great Bible', the work of Miles Coverdale (1488-1565), was published in 1539. In 1538, Henry abolished the cult of saints and relics, outlawed pilgrimage and the burning of candles before images.

After 1538, Henry inexplicably became more conservative – unless we are to measure this in terms of his personal life and his obsession with ensuring that he had a male heir.

Henry marries again

On 20 May 1536 (the day after the execution of Anne Boleyn), Henry and Jane Seymour were engaged; they married ten days later. On 12 October 1537, Jane gave birth to a son, Edward, but she died on 24 October after contracting an infection. Thomas Cromwell sought an alliance in Europe and persuaded Henry to marry Anne of Cleves (1515-57). There is some disagreement over what happened next. For many years, it was thought that Henry was persuaded by

⁷ <http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/tenarticles.htm> (accessed 18 April 2013).

rhetoric, as well as by a portrait he commissioned from Hans Holbein the Younger, that Anne was more beautiful than in reality she was. They married on 6 January 1540 but the marriage was not consummated, with Henry informing Cromwell 'I liked her before not well, but now I like her much worse'. On 24 June, Anne was commanded to leave Court and the marriage was annulled on 9 July by mutual consent. Anne received a settlement which treated her fairly favourably and she spent the rest of her days in England.

Nevertheless, it seems that Henry had already fallen for Catherine Howard. Catherine's uncle was the Duke of Norfolk who was growing in influence and had made an enemy of Cromwell. The reasons for Cromwell's downfall remain a mystery, though he might well have fallen out of favour because he had advocated the marriage to Anne while his political enemies – Norfolk included – took advantage of the situation. Cromwell was charged with a variety of offences, including heresy and treason, and imprisoned in the Tower on 15 June 1540, a mere fifty-three days after being granted the earldom of Essex by the King. Cromwell was condemned by a Bill of Attainder which passed through the House of Lords on 29 June. There was, then, to be no trial, but the King waited until his marriage to Anne had been annulled before signing the death warrant. Cromwell was beheaded on Tower Hill on 28 July 1540. It seems that Henry later came to regret this. A letter dated 3 March 1541, written by Charles de Marillac, French Ambassador to Henry's Court, claimed that the King now believed that he had been manipulated by his advisors, who 'under pretext of some slight offences which he [Cromwell] had committed ... had brought several accusations against him, on the strength of which he had put to death the most faithful servant he ever had'. On the same day as Cromwell's execution, Henry married Catherine.

Open Revolt

Given Henry's image as a strong, if not tyrannical, monarch, it is perhaps difficult to realize how precarious his reign was. Many ordinary people opposed changes to religious practice, and allegiance to the 'Old Faith' remained strong outside London and the south-east. Indeed, in 1536, almost the whole of northern England was in open revolt against Henry and Cromwell. The rebellion is known as the 'Pilgrimage of Grace'. Much of the northern nobility openly sided with the rebels in support of the Old Faith and the monasteries. They believed – mistakenly – that the king was being manipulated by 'lowly born' advisers, namely Cromwell, whom they blamed for the destruction of the religious houses. The rebellion began in Lincolnshire following an explosive sermon preached by the vicar of Louth. This fizzled out, but as it was slowly evaporating, a lawyer named Robert Aske (1500-37) travelled through the county. He soon raised a force of around 40,000 men and took York, Doncaster and Pontefract. Aske required the men to swear an oath 'for the maintenance of God's faith and Church, for the preservation of the king, for the purifying of the nobility of all bad blood and evil councillors, for the restitution of Christ's Church and for the suppression of heretical opinion'.⁸ Henry at first had to compromise and even 'parley' with Aske, but it soon became apparent that Aske was not in control of the rebellion and Thomas Howard, Earl of Norfolk, marched north with an

⁸ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 94.

impressive army, exacting a cruel revenge on the rebels. Aske was hanged in chains at York on 12 July 1537.

Further reform or a change of mind?

The precariousness of the reform movement, and the capriciousness of Henry's approach to reform, became clear by the late 1530s. In 1538, Francis Burkhardt, George von Boyneburg and Friedrich Myconius, three well-known German theologians, arrived in London to debate with the Anglican bishops and clergy. The result is intriguing. While the Germans presented an argument which suggested the Augsburg Confession as a means of establishing unity, a number of bishops avoided agreement. Break with Rome was not in question, but Bishops Cuthbert Tunstall of Durham (1474-1559) and John Stokesley of London (c.1475-1539) and others were suggesting not a pact with continental Protestants but with the Greek Orthodox. They also upheld what the Germans referred to as 'abuses', such as private masses, clerical celibacy, cult of saints. Cranmer, an exceptionally cautious man, more given at this time to doing the king's bidding than reforming the church, did express a desire to unite with German Protestants. Cranmer was probably the most Protestant of Henry's bishops and was intellectually and spiritually disposed towards Lutheran teaching. Henry would have none of it – neither Cranmer's Protestantism nor the desire to make links with the Orthodox. He dissolved the conference before any resolution could be made.

In 1538-39, much to Cromwell's annoyance, Henry insisted that Parliament debate doctrinal matters. In May 1539, the House of Lords examined six such questions which became the basis of the Six Articles of Religion which, in fact, reaffirmed traditional Catholic teaching on the following issues:

1. Transubstantiation.
2. Withholding the cup from the laity during the Eucharist.
3. Clerical celibacy.
4. Observance of vows of chastity.
5. Permission for private masses.
6. Permission for auricular confession.

Those who denied the first were to be burned as heretics, even if they recanted their views. Married clergy were to separate from their wives or be hanged. Those trying to flee the kingdom as a result of the passing of this legislation were to be executed as traitors, by hanging, drawing and quartering.

Had Henry changed his mind? Indeed, had he ever been truly committed to reform? Was he flexing his muscles in order to show that as King his will was supreme? The answer is not clear and could be a mixture of all three points. What is clear is that the Henrician reformation was unique in Europe in that it did not pursue a specifically Protestant agenda while the English, especially those at Court, were left guessing as to what Henry would do next.

While Henry certainly exercised personal rule, Thomas Cromwell (who was probably more convinced about Protestant doctrine than the king) cleverly

enabled Parliament to take the upper hand. While Henry became the Head of the Church as well as of the State, Cromwell ensured that Reform had to occur as a result of parliamentary statute. As such, Cromwell began to build foundations for the development of a nation where power was shared between monarch and parliament, a notion which would become all the more potent in the 1640s. Cromwell's legal genius has been noted by a number of historians. Harry Reid notes that:

Cromwell carefully wrote lucid preambles to his legislation. He was creating a new framework for the state as well as a new Church. He was building, almost single-handedly, a 'sovereign empire' based on the integrity and supremacy not of the king but of English law. And the supreme enabling tool of English law was parliamentary statute.⁹

It should be noted, for example, that the Act of Supremacy made Henry supreme head of the church in accordance with parliamentary will. It had noted: '... be it enacted by authority of this present Parliament, that the king our sovereign lord ... shall be taken, accepted and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England ...'¹⁰ It was, then, 'by authority' of 'Parliament' that the king was declared 'supreme head in earth ... of the Church of England' and not by his own authority, or by any 'divine right'.

On 30 July 1540, two days after the execution of Thomas Cromwell, Henry had three evangelical Protestants – Robert Barnes, Thomas Garret, William Jerome – burned as heretics at Smithfield, while he also had three Catholics – Thomas Abel, Richard Featherstone, Edward Powell – hanged as traitors for refusing to reject papal authority. (Powell had at one time been a favoured preacher at Court and a highly regarded Doctor of Divinity from Oxford University. He was ordered, in 1523, to write a refutation of Luther's work. He was later chosen to defend the legality of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon and he condemned Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn.)

The executions – cruel, arbitrary and unnecessary – are significant for two reasons. First, Henry was signaling that neither emphatic Protestantism nor conscientious Catholicism were acceptable. Instead, the people were to follow his own version of Christian faith and practice in England. Second, while to hold extreme Protestant views was judged heresy, to hold Catholic views was judged to be treason (under the 1534 Act). Yet in both cases it was his self-appointed status as Head of the Church in England that lay behind the executions.

In 1543, Henry passed the Act for the Advancement of True Religion which condemned unorthodox translations of the Bible and listed women, artificers, apprentices, husbandmen, labourers and others as those who were to be stopped from reading the Bible because they could not be trusted to understand it. 'The truth was there for all to see: Henry's Reformation was a state reformation, and

⁹ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 82.

¹⁰ Quoted in R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 116.

for him it was ultimately about social and political control, not religious freedom'.¹¹

Yet another queen

Meanwhile, it seems that Catherine Howard had been involved with one Francis Dereham who became her secretary. Dereham later denied that the relationship continued after her marriage to Henry and that it had ever been sexual, though this was not enough to save him. Once married, Catherine began an affair with a young courtier called Thomas Culpeper. The relationship became known at Court and finally both Dereham and Culpeper were executed. Catherine followed them to the block at 8.00 a.m. on 13 February 1542. Though uncertain, some contemporary accounts put her as young as 17 years of age when she met her end. Henry was 50. On 12 July 1543 Henry married Catherine Parr who remained married to him until his death on 28 January 1547. When he died, Henry was morbidly obese and with a reputation for being lustful, egotistical, harsh and insecure.

There remains the question: to what extent was Henry's Church truly reformed? Harry Reid notes:

Without Cromwell, the king held to his course: England had rejected the pope but had not embraced the reformers. This of course frustrated both leading Catholics, who probably represented the majority of the population – and the reformers, among whose number was Thomas Cranmer, the learned and cautious Archbishop of Canterbury. So, there was confusion; and it was not until Henry's daughter Elizabeth became queen, almost twenty years later, that England finally became unequivocally and permanently Protestant. But the settlement over which Elizabeth presided was in essence the one her father had wanted.¹²

¹¹ Reid, *Reformation*, p. 104.

¹² Reid, *Reformation*, p. 100.