

The Reformation in England: A Reconsideration of Henry VIII's Break from Rome

by

Professor J. B. CONACHER, Ph.D.,

Department of History, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Since the Reformation¹ in England continues to be a topic of perennial interest to historians who produce a never-ending flow of books about it, there would seem to be some justification for an occasional pause to reconsider some of its problems in the light of the new literature on the subject. In particular I am prompted to do so on this occasion by the appearance within the last few years of what is perhaps the greatest Catholic contribution to English history since the publication of Lingard's famous *History* over a century ago. Father Philip Hughes' three volumes entitled *The Reformation in England* comprise probably the most thorough and well informed general work on the subject to appear in our time, but it is only one of several that should be considered. Quite apart from biographies and more specialized monographs on special aspects there have been a number of worthwhile general works of varying length, written by historians with different points of view but without polemics – the two French Catholic historians, M. Pierre Janelle and Abbé Constant, the High Anglican Canon Maynard Smith, the more Protestant (presumably non-conformist) Rev. E. G. Rupp, the moderate non-conformist Sir Maurice Powicke, and the remarkably well balanced and succinct little synthesis of Mr. T. M. Parker recently published in the Home University Library series.²

What should be the attitude of the Catholic historian in approaching such a difficult subject as the Reformation? First of all I would think that he should remember the advice of Pope Leo XIII (recalled to this Association two years ago by Bishop MacDonald at Antigonish) “that the Church has nothing to fear from historical truth.” “The first law of history,” we were told, “is to dread uttering falsehood; the second is not to fear stating the truth.” This seems to me particularly pertinent advice in dealing with the sixteenth century. The Catholic

¹ “Protestant Revolution” might be a more accurate term but with a capital “R” the word “Reformation” is one of those accepted historical words or phrases (such as “Industrial Revolution”) that have become part of the language and are generally recognized, despite their technical inaccuracy.

² See the bibliography for titles. One might add F. E. Hutchinson, *Cranmer and the English Reformation* (London, 1951) which is somewhat similar to Parker, but centres the story on Cranmer.

historian, I would think, should always bear in mind that he is writing as an historian. He seeks to find out what happened and in so far as he can to explain what happened. As an historian he is not really concerned in making theological judgments. He should even be hesitant to make moral judgments.³ All historians are inevitably influenced by their environment and the Catholic student of history will naturally approach the subject of the Reformation with a peculiarly sensitive interest. As one who practises essentially the same religion as his pre-Reformation forebears he has some advantage over most non-Catholic students because the issues are likely to be more real to him than to them, but he must not assume too much and must beware of confusing the sixteenth century with the twentieth. Moreover the Catholic will have to be all the more alert to ensure that his emotional involvement does not upset his historical judgment. What different emotions, for instance, may be stirred by such an innocent phrase as “The White Horse Inn.” In Protestant ears this may conjure up a picture of a small band of courageous zealots planning the advancement of the true religion, while the Catholic may be inclined to picture a sinister nest of traitors plotting to subvert the old Faith.⁴ There may be an element of truth and an element of exaggeration in both pictures, but the historian should control his emotions and ask himself why these men came together as they did and why they were so interested in the new ideas from Germany.

In view of the magnitude of the subject and the lack of time I propose to confine myself to discussing the question of how Henry VIII succeeded in getting his way so easily. It is one that naturally puzzles the modern English-speaking Catholic. It is difficult for him today to envisage national apostasy on such a scale. Looking at Eastern Europe he is likely to assume that it must have been a matter of extermination. The facts, however, do not quite fit this picture although force was an important factor. To the non-Catholic who does not go below the surface it seems an obvious case of the ripe fruit falling off the tree. England he will argue was simply ripe for Protestantism. But this explanation, as we shall see, is equally inconsistent with the facts.

The so-called “divorce case” was, of course, merely the occasion of the break. There is no single or simple explanation for the ease with which it was accomplished. Rather there were a wide variety of factors, no one of them by itself sufficiently powerful to precipitate the revolution, but with a cumulative effect sufficiently powerful to do so. For convenience we may consider these factors

³ Professor Herbert Butterfield has criticised the traditional Protestant interpretation of the Reformation on this very ground in his well-known essay *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).

⁴ See H. Maynard Smith, *Henry VIII and the Reformation* (London, 1948), pp. 251-262. For a vivid picture of the group of young Cambridge men who met there in the 1520's, see also E. G. Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 18-19; A. G. Chester, *Hugh Latimer* (Philadelphia, 1954), p. 14, who says that Smith has exaggerated in his vivid picture of the group as a sort of university club.

under five headings: 1) The relationship between Church and State; 2) The influence of humanism; 3) The prevalence of heresy; 4) The existence of abuses in the Church; 5) The growth of anticlericalism. These factors are, of course, all closely interdependent. As we shall notice historians differ in the stress which they lay on each of these factors since their importance is a matter of opinion.

Friction between crown and papacy is a commonplace of medieval history. Since everybody recognized the two jurisdictions,⁵ spiritual and temporal, there were bound to be disputes as to where the dividing line should be drawn in the broad borderland between the two. This is the very first factor that Abbé Constant considers in his preliminary chapter on the causes of the schism where he writes: “Henry VIII’s Schism was but an episode in the eternal conflict between Church and State and in England the conflict was now new.”⁶ The fourteenth century Statutes of Provisors and Praemunire limiting the powers of the papacy in the providing of benefices in England and forbidding the appeal of cases outside the kingdom which properly came within the cognizance of the king’s courts, are good examples of the historic friction between the two. They represented temporary differences between Church and State but these were not nearly as serious as the great flare-ups in the reigns of Henry II and John. Indeed, M. Janelle, who pays particular attention to this factor in his *L’Angleterre catholique à la veille du schisme*,⁷ has pointed out that, although there were a few more anti-papal statutes under Henry IV, they in fact confirmed the abuses that they nominally sought to relieve almost as much as they condemned them. Throughout the fifteenth century papal provisions were made and there was no diminution in the number of appeals to Rome. Nor was there anything similar to the Sanction of Bourges with which the French king defied the papacy in 1438. On the contrary in 1462 Edward IV granted a “charter of liberties” to the Church which seemed largely to reverse the Statute of Praemunire:⁸ and under the first Tudor Church. State relations remained tranquil.

One distinguished English medievalist, Sir Maurice Powicke, has crossed the artificial barrier of the year 1485 and written an interesting and penetrating essay on *The Reformation in England*. He is naturally aware of the significance of the relationship between Church and State in understanding what happened in the sixteenth century. On reviewing its history he readily concedes that “the action of Henry VIII and his successors amounted to a revolution.”⁹ But he points out that in effect it had led to so much compromise that only one or two clear-minded men

⁵ See F. A. Cardinal Gasquet, *The Eve of the Reformation* (London, 1900), chapter III, ‘The Two Jurisdictions.’

⁶ G. Constant, *The Reformation in England – I. The English Schism Henry VIII* (English translation by Rev. R. E. Scantlebury, London, 1934), p. 1.

⁷ Pierre Janelle, *L’Angleterre catholique à la veille du schisme* (Paris, 1935), pp. 48-55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹ F. M. Powicke, *The Reformation in England* (London, 1941), p. 2.

such as Fisher and particularly More fully realized its implications: “In the contrast between him [More] and the people about him,’ Powicke remarks, “we can see how far religious society had drifted in the current of secularism and compromise from the acceptance of the medieval system, however irksome or imperfect, as beyond question.”¹⁰ Powicke goes on to make the following pertinent observations:

Our difficulty in comprehending the course of events is doubtless partly due to the fact that to the modern mind English history does seem to begin again with the Reformation. We can see the results of the revolution and we tend to suppose that they were equally obvious at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Our categories are more clearly defined, and as we find it hard to think of England as other than a Protestant country, so we are disposed to feel, if not to think, that the Reformation was, as it were, a rebound to the normal, and the more self-conscious because it appears to have been so easy. This attitude is nothing more than a form of our insular self-possession, and the ease with which King Henry made himself supreme was due to a situation precisely the opposite of that which we imagine.¹¹

The bishops of the later middle ages, ignoring the warning of their more farseeing thirteenth century predecessor, Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln, saw no objection to a compromise in which they served two masters, since it was a matter of practical politics and seemed to involve no surrender of principle. “And for the sake of peace, King and Pope tended in the same direction.”

It is this tendency to compromise [Powicke continues] which has caused so much misunderstanding and perplexity to historians of the medieval Church in England. Everyone has been able to find, or to imagine that he had found, what he set out to find. The Puritan lawyers of the seventeenth century ... [and] the high churchman of a later day ... both saw in the exercise of Papal control a kind of usurpation. They neglected or were unaware of the variety of local custom which was permitted to survive in various parts of the Church, and also of the element of compromise which existed in one form or another in every country, as well as in insular] England, without prejudice to the belief in the essential unity of the Church.¹²

Past friction between Church and State on the one hand and a certain haziness about their inter-relationship on the other are obviously factors that affect our problem. Yet there does not seem to be any clear build-up towards the final crisis as there was for instance in the sphere of secular history when the American Colonies revolted in the eighteenth century. Indeed the very fact that there were so many precedents for squabbles that came to nothing, may well have lulled many

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

wishful thinkers who paid lip service to Henry VIII's policy into thinking that this particular crisis of 1527-1533 would be surmounted as had others in the past.

There is another aspect of this church-state relationship that we should consider. As long as the basic position of the ecclesiastical and temporal jurisdictions was generally recognized the occasional friction would not be expected to upset the balance between them. But two developments of the latter half of the fifteenth century did seriously undermine this medieval equilibrium: the debasement on the one hand of the Renaissance papacy and on the other the growth of the nation state in western Europe and of the modern idea of sovereignty—which in England is to be seen in the extraordinary growth in the prestige of the monarchy under the Tudors.

The captivity of Avignon (1305-1377), the Great Schism (1378-1417), and the subsequent challenge of the conciliar movement had all combined to weaken gravely the prestige of the papacy, but the sixty odd years, (1471-1534), prior to the English schism witnessed its temporary but all too real moral degeneracy. Most of the Popes of this period¹³ were first and foremost Italian renaissance princelings, preoccupied with temporal ambitions and virtually destitute of spiritual leadership. Simony, nepotism, pluralism and absenteeism were the order of the day and the evil living at the papal court was the scandal of Christendom.

Most historians of the English Reformation allude to the state of the Renaissance papacy,¹⁴ but Father Hughes surprisingly ignores it in his thorough examination of the Church in England on the eve of the break. Presumably he takes it all for granted since he has already dealt with it so well in the third volume of his *History of the Catholic Church*. It seems to me, however, that the fact that all Englishmen living in Henry VIII's time had been born and brought up in the shadow of the Renaissance papacy does help to explain what eventually happened. Human loyalty and respect (the natural and spontaneous sentiment of the modern Catholic towards the papal see) must have been sapped and weakened by the unedifying spectacle of those years. Although the ideas of such radical thinkers as Marsiglio of Padua, (1280-1343), and William of Ockam, (1280-1347), about the independent power of temporal rulers were not generally accepted in their own day any more than was Marx's *Das Kapital* in the mid-nineteenth century, their revolutionary arguments would be quickly seized by those who were paid to defend the course of a Renaissance sovereign who might seek to break his kingdom's ties with Rome.

¹³ Sixtus IV (1471-1484), Innocent VIII (1484-1492), Alexander VI (1492-1503), Julius II (1503-1513), Leo X (1513-1521), and Clement VII (1523-1534). I except Pius III (1503) and Adrian VI (1522-1523) whose reigns were too brief to affect the course of events. Clement VII was perhaps a slight improvement over the others, but he showed himself quite incapable of coping with the terrible problems that faced him.

¹⁴ H. Maynard Smith, *Pre-Reformation England* (London, 1938), p. 12; T. M. Parker, *The English Reformation to 1558* (London, 1950), p. 3; cf. also Constant, Janelle, Powicke as already indicated.

Indeed the temporal institution of the monarchy in England as else. where had been greatly strengthened in the very years that witnessed the papacy's sad if temporary decline. The new concept of sovereignty typical of Renaissance political thinking was easily accepted in England where men were tired of the insecurity associated with the War of the Roses. The same Renaissance influences that produced the new nation states of western Europe were felt in England in the late fifteenth century, and with the decay of the late medieval baronage the Tudors stood out head and shoulders above all their subjects, winning ready and genuine loyalty from the mass of them. It is true that there were a number of popular risings during the Tudor period, but it is significant that the rebels frequently proclaimed their loyalty to the king, and blamed all the evils against which they protested on popular ministers whom they begged him to dismiss. Moreover, these rebellions all failed, and in their failure we catch a glimpse of the steel which lay underneath the popular monarchy and that was an important element in its strength. Thus we may conclude that in the event of a clash between an apparently decadent papacy far away and this new strong monarchy right at home, it would require considerable fortitude to resist the tide of the times. It remains to be seen whether the English Catholics of those days possessed that fortitude and if not, why not.

The influence of humanism is a more difficult factor to analyse since it was to affect the Catholic as well as the Protestant Reformation. Undoubtedly it was a powerful force in the latter but it was only one of many. The early English humanists were practically all orthodox Catholic churchmen from fifteenth century precursors such as the monks Selling and Hadley to the famous group who enlightened the latter years of Henry VII's reign and the early years of his son's, men such as Grocyn, Linacre, Colet and their Dutch associate Erasmus. Their young friend and disciple Thomas More¹⁵ was the exception in choosing a lay career. Except for the royal family the patrons of this movement were mostly bishops from the saintly Fisher to the worldly Wolsey, both of whom were responsible for new endowments at Oxford and Cambridge. The new learning turned some of its adherents to examine the many abuses in the contemporary Church. Dean Colet condemned the worldliness of the clergy with great courage, but he also condemned the whole scholastic system which had declined badly since the days of Aquinas. Instead, in the humanist spirit, he turned to a re-examination of the *New Testament*. The orthodoxy of his teaching was questioned but never condemned, yet it must be admitted that his methods pointed more to the future Protestant than to the old Catholic tradition, and it would appear that they helped to lead his English heirs out of the old Church into the new. Yet

¹⁵ R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (London, 1935) remains the modern biography, although E. E. Reynolds, *Saint Thomas More* (London, 1953), a recent Catholic life, lays more stress on the religious aspect of his career. W. E. Campbell, *Erasmus, Tyndale and More* (London, 1949) a recent Catholic study, is rather disappointing.

had he lived longer it is probable that like Erasmus he would have rejected Luther's teaching, and that he would even have joined More and Fisher in resisting Henry's Supremacy.

Erasmus was another Catholic humanist who perhaps unwittingly helped the Protestant cause. His satires on the abuses in the Church, although accepted in a tolerant spirit by his friend More, proved useful ammunition for those who would "reform" the Church by abolishing Catholic practices altogether. Likewise his annotated edition of the *New Testament (Novum Instrumentum)*, although accepted by Leo X (who was a better humanist than a pope), was to be a favourite text with the new generation of Reformers soon to appear at Cambridge. Oxford was the first centre of English humanism (although the leading lights were perhaps just as closely connected with London), but the ideas spread to Cambridge where in the 1520's they helped to inspire a group of young men such as Cranmer, Latimer, Bilney, Ridley, Barnes and others who were soon to become Protestant leaders.

Most recent writers recognize the connection between humanism and the Reformation while admitting that it presents no simple pattern of cause and effect. Canon Maynard Smith entitles the second of two chapters on the subject "The Catholic Reformers," saying that Seebohm's phrase "the Oxford Reformers" is misleading. However, one is uncertain of his own meaning since he goes on to speak of them as Anglican prototypes. "From the beginning of the XVII century," he writes, "the Church of England may claim to represent the views of Colet, More, Erasmus and Henry VIII in everything except their acceptance of the papal claims. Colet was a typical Evangelical; More we should now call a Liberal Catholic; Erasmus was a Broad Churchman insisting on conduct; and the young king was a High Churchman insisting on tradition."¹⁶

Hughes is strangely silent on the subject and Constant is brief but to the point when he writes:

The Humanists had set the fashion for these bitter criticisms of current abuses. They wanted to reform the Church from within. They intended to rid the Church of dross, not to destroy her; but their efforts over-reached their object. Unknowingly they prepared the way for the great religious revolution of the sixteenth century. By ridiculing the scholastic methods they indirectly discredited the Church's teaching. By demanding free criticism of the Scriptures they opened the door to private judgment. Their sarcastic comments upon the exaggerated veneration of relics and images, and upon the abuses connected with pilgrimages and indulgences, led to the abolition of these practices, while their attacks upon the clergy, who were more or less worthy men, facilitated the overthrow of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.¹⁷

Mr. T. M. Parker judiciously observes that "Both Protestantism and

¹⁶ Maynard Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 451.

¹⁷ Constant, *Reformation in England*, I, p. 16.

Catholicism had their medieval and their Renaissance elements and it is a work of the utmost delicacy to distinguish between them in either case.”¹⁸ “In so far as they are not *sui generis*,” he says, “the Catholic reforming group of the early sixteenth century in England are precursors of the Counter-Reformation humanism which Bremond has so attractively depicted in its French manifestations.”¹⁹

The Reverend Mr. E. G. Rupp while admitting that “The names of More and Fisher are reminders that the course of true humanism could run smoothly enough with orthodoxy,”²⁰ is of the opinion that “it is in the Universities that the connection between the Renaissance and the Reformation movement becomes most apparent.”²¹ He stresses the interest of the Cambridge Reformers in the new classical learning. An American scholar, however, L. B. Smith, in a recent study of the Henrician episcopacy argues that the Protestant wing, mostly recruited from the Universities, were not genuine humanists. “They studied the ‘New Learning’, its Greek and Latin, with vigor, but not for the sake of its classical poets and historians. They were progressive in the sense that they broke with the past, with the authority of the medieval scholastic scholars, but they were never humanists. ... These learned dons struggled with classical Latin in order to meditate upon St. Ambrose, not to savor a Ciceronian oration; they practised Greek in order to learn the customs of the primitive church, not to read of the heroes of Homer.”²² The conservative Henrician bishops on the other hand, he says, were humanists almost to a man; worldly and refined, they appreciated the classics for their own sakes and the human values that they reflected.

Next it may be asked whether the prior existence of heresy in England made Henry’s task the easier. Not unnaturally Wyclif and the Lollards have been looked upon as the precursors of the English Reformation, but it is difficult to establish any direct connection. Once a thriving heresy it had largely been stamped out before Tudor times and it has been suggested that England’s orthodoxy on the eve of the Reformation was the result of the violent reaction to this earlier English heresy.²³ There was some survival of Lollardy and some revival of persecution in the early part of Henry VIII’s reign. The weakness of the movement at that time is now generally recognized, but there is still some difference of opinion as to its importance. Constant is noncommittal but his summary of the movement in his chapter on the causes of the schism suggests that he did not think it unimportant. He notes that Gairdner in his *Lollardy and the Reformation in England* has been criticised for underestimating Lollard influence.²⁴ Hughes confines himself typically to a systematic but non-committal summary of the heresy charges in

¹⁸ Parker, *English Reformation to 1558*, p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁰ Rupp, *English Protestant Tradition*, p. 16.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²² L. B. Smith, *Tudor Prelates and Politics 1536-1558* (Princeton, 1953), p.51.

²³ G. R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* (London, 1955), p. 110.

²⁴ Constant, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 9-13 and p. 45.

Henry VIII's reign prior to 1533, which add up to over 800. He identifies most of the defendants as Lollards, but points out that they were confined largely to two dioceses, Lincoln and London, and that the great majority abjured.²⁵ Among recent Protestant historians Rupp devotes a chapter entitled "The secret multitude of true professors" to the subject. "Any due assessment of the causes and consequences of the English Reformation," he asserts, "must take into account the survival of Lollardy."²⁶ He does not claim, as has been done, that the so-called "Christian Brethren" who first promoted the distribution of Lutheran books in England were all Lollards, but he does see them as an important element in the reading public who subscribed to Tyndale's works.²⁷ Maynard Smith devotes a chapter to "The history of Lollardy" and comes to the conclusion that in numbers and in their position in the community the Lollards of the early sixteenth century resembled the Communists in modern Britain. He supposes that they welcomed the advent of Lutheranism but points out that doctrinally they had more in common with Luther's enemies the Anabaptists.²⁸ Parker notes the sympathetic view of Rupp and the somewhat disparaging remarks of Maynard Smith and he himself observes: "One cannot help thinking that the ecclesiastical affiliations of these two authors to some extent determine their judgments and it is safest merely to say that Lollardy still survived sufficiently to cause periodical uneasiness to the authorities."²⁹ This seems to be a sensible conclusion, but one might add that the extent of the movement over the previous century did suggest that a strain had appeared in the English temperament that indicated that at least parts of the country were not infertile fields for the spread of heresy. And the old heretics derived nourishment from a common source with the new in Tyndale's translation of the *New Testament*.³⁰

In the years after 1517 heresy was more and more likely to be of Lutheran origin and the spread of Lutheran ideas must be considered as yet another possible factor in explaining what happened in England. It is generally accepted that in the 1520's these ideas began to take some root in the more commercially advanced centres of the south and the east where merchants provided direct contact with the continent. Cambridge in particular became a centre of the new ideas even while Bishop Fisher was still Chancellor. As yet it was largely confined to young hotheads in the university, but a surprising number of those who gathered informally at the White Horse Inn were sooner or later to make their name as Protestant leaders, including nine future bishops and at least eight Protestant mar-

²⁵ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 126-132. All but twenty of those convicted abjured.

²⁶ Rupp, *English Protestant Tradition*, p. 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-12.

²⁸ Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 292.

²⁹ Parker, *English Reformation*, p. 19.

³⁰ James Gairdner, *Lollardy and the Reformation in England* (London, 1908),

tyrs.³¹ For the time being the group was broken up by the action of the ecclesiastical authorities, but it was a straw in the wind and the contagion spread to Oxford where Wolsey's new college drew on Cambridge men.

Two important factors in the success of the Protestant Reformation in England were undoubtedly Tyndale's translation of the *New Testament* and Cranmer's English *Prayer Book*. The latter, of course, was first published long after the initial break and consequently has no bearing on our immediate problem, although in time it probably helped many waverers to adapt themselves to the new ways. Tyndale's *New Testament* played a different role. It was a clarion call to potential rebels. Tyndale seized the opportunity presented by the relatively new medium of cheap printing and the growing nationalism of the English people to present them with a printed version of the *New Testament* in their own tongue, in which many words and phrases were now translated in a Protestant sense, too Protestant it would seem for some modern Anglicans.³² Protestant writers, as might be expected, stress the role of Tyndale,³³ but perhaps the most striking testimony of his importance (because it comes from a Catholic historian) is that of Father Hughes who devotes sixteen pages to the subject, in the course of which he writes:

Unless such as Tyndale can be seen from their own point of view, and the teaching they offered as a highly spiritual thing, making professedly for an ever deeper understanding of the Christian vocation to intimacy with God through Christ now, in the very moment of the present life, much of the secret of the next hundred years will escape us. And although Tyndale is, no doubt, no isolated figure, although there were others who held his views, and with as deep conviction, nowhere so well as in Tyndale's writings is it so easy to recapture that invincible enthusiasm. Without a Henry VIII, a Cromwell, a Somerset, a Cecil, this enthusiasm might well indeed never have produced anything more than a handful of victims to perish at the stake. And, without some enthusiasm of this quality and degree, not all the new determination to establish one single ruling authority over the lives of the English, to control religion therefore, and to treat its properties as a royal estate, would have availed to do more than produce, four hundred years before its time, that barren waste in which, at last, the average Englishman has his spiritual being.³⁴

³¹ Smith, *Henry VIII and the Reformation*, p. 254. Rupp, *The English Protestant Tradition*, p. 197, lists 25 Protestant martyrs from Cambridge.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298

³³ *Ibid.*, Part II, chap. II, "The Holy Bible and the Life of Tyndale"; Rupp, *English Protestant Tradition*, chap. III, "Home truths from abroad"; M. M. Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (Chicago, 1939), chap. I, "Tyndale and the continental background"; and, of course, the standard modern biography J. F. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (London, 1937). Rupp and Knappen note the importance of a growing English Protestant émigré party abroad during these years.

³⁴ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, p. 139.

Constant attaches less importance to this factor which he dismisses in these terms:

Dogma, in fact, did not have the same share in the Reformation in England as did justification by faith in Germany, or predestination in Switzerland. Englishmen are not lovers of abstract ideas. Not being logical like the French, nor mystics like the Germans, they do not enter into theological quarrels; they are more for questions of a practical nature. So the Reformation began in England, not with the proclamation of some theological novelty, but rather with the destroying of the clergy's privileges and confiscation of the Church's property. The Reformation in this country was brought about solely by a grievance of a practical order intimately bound up with a question of money.³⁵

There is a difference in stress in these two views, but they do not completely contradict each other. No serious historian will deny that in its initial stages at least the English Reformation was a political rather than a religious movement. But, as Hughes suggests, it was important to the political sponsors of the break to have religious zealots waiting off stage ready to come to their assistance. However, the very existence of these potential rebels raises the question why were there Catholics, many of them including Tyndale, ordained Catholic priests, ready to deny the faith of their ancestors. As we have seen, the state of the papacy and the spread of humanism have some bearing on this situation, but perhaps the most important is the fourth factor which we have undertaken to examine, the existence of abuses in the Church that were in need of some reformation.

It should not be necessary to say very much about the nature of these abuses since the subject is a familiar one, the commonplace of all books on the period. There is a great deal of evidence on the subject, but it is difficult to gauge, and it is easily exaggerated or oversimplified. No serious Catholic historian will deny their existence, although there will be differences of opinion about their extent, and about the principles that lay behind existing practices. The topic opens up a bottomless pit which we must beware of falling into. Many writers are so exhausted when they have finished the catalogue that they have lost all perspective!

The failings upon which Hughes and Constant concentrate their attention have to do mainly with the clergy. Constant is brief but to the point when he writes:

Unfortunately the clergy in England laid themselves open to these criticisms [of Colet's]. The country clergy, who lived the life of the yeomen farmers, were ignorant and despised by the middle classes ... In 1535 Edward Lee, Archbishop of York, bewailed the fact that he had not twelve secular priests capable of preaching; that, with the exception of a few Dominicans,

³⁵ Constant, *Reformation in England*, I, p. 31. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, pp. 109-110, is equally categorical.

none of the religious were trained to preach; and that those who were appointed to the best benefices did not reside in them. Thomas More regretted the lack of discretion in choosing clerics, and represented this as one of the chief abuses of the Church in England. The higher clergy cared little about possessing the qualities necessary for their state. Since Henry VII's day, a bishop had become a royal official drawing a pension from the Church's revenues; his cleverness had brought him to the king's notice, and he looked to the latter for preferment, and continued to serve him at court by undertaking either embassies or diplomatic missions. His own diocese never saw him, except when he was worn out, aged, or in disgrace ... In 1530 all the episcopal sees save four belonged to non-residents or royal officials. The same could be said of half the deaneries and archdeaneries ... Despite his great qualities and his unquestionable superiority, their leader, Wolsey, cardinal and legate – the merchant's son raised to an insolent degree of fortune – did not set them an example with his pomp; arrogance, love of riches, or with his own neglect of his professional duties or his behaviour in private life.³⁶

The last sentence is surely an understatement. The failings of the other bishops, who with one or two possible exceptions were not bad men, pale beside those of the Cardinal of York, the most blatant pluralist of his day, whose Machiavelian diplomacy was the antithesis of Christian statesmanship, and whose avarice, arrogance and incontinence were the shame of the Church in which he held such high office. And he was the one man in England for more than a century who had serious pretensions to the papal see itself! But the harm he did to the Church did not stop with the scandal which he created by his bad example. By forcing Clement VII to make him *legatus a latere* for life he virtually supplanted the pope in England, and after his downfall his master the King was quick to see the advantages of concentrating the dual powers of Church and State in his own hands as Wolsey himself had done for more than a decade.³⁷

Nevertheless the failure of the rest of the episcopacy to give leadership, especially after the fall of Wolsey, is obviously of great significance. Brother Bonaventure, who read a paper to this Association a few years ago on "The Propaganda Campaign against the Holy See by the Henrician Bishops," has made a very interesting analysis of that body on the eve of the schism in an unpublished thesis.³⁸ He examines the careers of twenty-three bishops all of whom except Fox

³⁶ Constant, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 18-21; these statements are backed up with elaborate footnotes going into greater details; but surely Wolsey's few reform measures are of no significance since there is no evidence of proper motivation.

³⁷ See A. F. Pollard, *Wolsey* (London, 1929), V, "Papal Legate," p. 363 and *passim*. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, p. 121, disagrees with Pollard's suggestion, perhaps with some reason.

³⁸ Brother Bonaventure (John Nelson Miner), "The English Bishops and the Henrician Church Settlement 1527-1539" (unpublished M.A. thesis at the University of Toronto, 1953), chapters II and III and Appendix VI. I have made

(d. 1528) and Wolsey (d. 1530) were in office on the eve of the schism in 1532. Three of these were foreign: the Spanish Ateca, chaplain to Queen Catherine, and Bishop of Llandaff; and the two Italians, Ghinucci and Campeggio (the Cardinal), absentee bishops of Salisbury and Worcester, who are less important for our purpose except in so far as they illustrate the unhappy way in which these offices were bestowed as valuable rewards to men quite incapable of performing their duties. Of the twenty-three Brother Bonaventure finds that eighteen were pluralists and eleven non-resident, but I believe that at least four more may be added to this number as absentees for at least part of their episcopal careers. He finds evidence that at least eleven of the twenty English bishops were in the royal service before their appointment and nine afterwards, not to mention the two Italians who were expected to look after Henry's interests in Rome, and the Spaniard who was in the private service of the Queen. (These figures possibly should be higher.) At least eighteen of the English bishops were university men, but only six had degrees in divinity. At least nine were students of law (only one D.C.L.), which offered the best prospects for advancement to an ambitious cleric. Only a small minority seem to have pursued their diocesan duties with diligence. Some were even too busy on the king's business to attend their own enthronements! Not all were in attendance at the royal court, but all were at the beck and call of the king. Only four it may be added had black marks against their private characters, while two others are rather enigmatically described as "lacking in discretion." "While generalizations cannot be pressed too far," Brother Bonaventure concludes, "the foregoing survey does suggest that the bishops were committed to a way of life that would eventually compromise their essential prerogatives."³⁹

As for the lower clergy it is quite clear that the great majority of them were lacking in any proper training and this, as Hughes points out, was one of the fundamental weaknesses of the Church at the time.⁴⁰ It is difficult for a modern Catholic to grasp that the seminary training now taken for granted was the "invention," as Hughes calls it, of the Council of Trent. Hundreds of priests were ordained indiscriminately every year and many were left to wander around the countryside looking for clerical employment. Hughes quotes a contemporary Cambridge theologian who "describes how they inevitably drift into bad courses, hawking and hunting, tavern-haunting, dicing, bad women and so forth, and gaining a living by all kinds of secular employments." An imaginative characterization of one of these wandering priests is to be found in a recent novel that is remarkably successful in recreating the religious atmosphere of the time.⁴¹ Despising the worthless life he leads one is not surprised to find the poor wretch

a few minor corrections to the statistics. Cf. L. B. Smith, *Tudor Prelates and Politics*, which appeared after Brother Bonaventure's thesis had been completed.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁰ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 83-85.

⁴¹ H. F. M. Prescott, *Man on a Donkey* (London, 1952).

imbibing the new Lutheran ideas that seem to offer some escape to his tortured soul.

In concluding his remarks on the subject Hughes suggests that the secular clergy may be divided into two classes, the learned *elite*, and the vast untrained clerical *plebs*. The first group, including university dons, clerical lawyers and judges, diplomats and royal administrators, although often blameless in their private lives, are generally guilty of pluralism and non-residence, and so without any influence with the mass of the people who are left in the hands of the second.⁴²

Maynard Smith paints much the same picture with more detail. With engaging frankness he notes the evils of pluralism in England outlasted the Reformation by three hundred years. He defends the lower clergy against the more extreme charges of illiteracy since there were many schools in existence. Indeed, he suggests that “the general education of the clergy at the beginning of the XVI century was probably higher than it was fifty years later.”⁴³ Considering the lack of proper selection and training one cannot be too surprised to find evidence of immorality among some of the clergy. Smith goes into the subject with his usual thoroughness, but again he warns that contemporary critics were prone to exaggerate.⁴⁴ The fact that there were some grounds for their charges, however, was yet another factor in weakening the general prestige of the Church in the eyes of the laity.

Perhaps no branch of the late medieval Church has come in for so much criticism as the monasteries. Their defence at the beginning of the century by Cardinal Gasquet⁴⁵ was followed by Mr. Baskerville’s rather hostile study.⁴⁶ Hughes takes a midway position in a very useful analysis, which forms one of the best parts of his first volume. He bases his picture of conditions in the monasteries in the detailed visitation reports⁴⁷ for the populous dioceses of Norwich and Lincoln which accounted for one third of the houses in the whole country. In eighty-nine out of a total of two hundred and four visitations to some ninety-five houses spread over a period of fifteen years there was virtually nothing to report. On the other hand in twenty houses, including one convent (i.e. 21 per cent of the total) really serious conditions were reported involving charges of sexual immoral-

⁴² Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 88.89.

⁴³ Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 42 and *passim*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-53.

⁴⁵ F. A. Cardinal Gasquet, *Henry VIII and the English Monasteries* (6th ed., London, 1902), 2 vols.

⁴⁶ G. Baskerville, *English Monks and the Suppression of the Monasteries* (London, 1937) is a scholarly but somewhat flippant treatment of the subject. Hughes admits its merits but points out that he draws his conclusions from too small a sampling of cases (*Reformation in England*, I, pp. 289-290, n. 4, and p. 386).

⁴⁷ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 36-70; the Norwich records, ed. by A. Jessopp, were published in 1888, the Lincoln records, ed. by J. Hamilton Thompson, between 1938 and 1947.

ity, gross mismanagement, and the like. In the remaining cases varying degrees of laxity were revealed, of which neglect of the choral office, lack of proper training for novices, and breaking of the rules governing meals were the most common. Most lay readers will probably sympathize with the element of human frailty revealed by complaints of the difficulty in getting monks to go to bed at night, of rousing them in the early morning, and of monks being sleepy from late staying-up. We do not have to believe the more exaggerated stories of Cromwell's unscrupulous visitors to realize that the English monks of the early sixteenth century can no longer have retained the high prestige and respect among the laity so long enjoyed by many of their earlier predecessors. To the modern Catholic the fundamental weakness of the religious orders generally is to be seen in the ease with which the vast majority of their members took the oath acknowledging Henry's Supremacy. The Carthusians of the Charterhouse and the Observant Franciscans were but noble exceptions who emphasized the weakness of their brethren. In particular there were a disconcerting number of dispossessed abbots and other regulars ready to become bishops under the Royal Supremacy.⁴⁸ Yet despite all their shortcomings it was the dissolution of the monasteries that sparked the one serious attempt at lay resistance to Henry's revolution.⁴⁹

Perhaps no aspect of the pre-Reformation Church arouses the suspicion and even hostility of non-Catholic historians so much as the amount of superstition that was alleged to exist in the popular religious practices of the day. The reforms initiated by the Council of Trent make it clear that there were serious abuses of this sort, but fundamentally most Protestant critics are as annoyed by the genuine Catholic principles behind these practices as with the abuses of them. Maynard Smith, who goes into the whole question in great detail, tries to be fairer than this, but there is no getting away from irreconcilability of Catholic ideas and his own on some of these matters. "There is much to be said in favour of images – the poor man's books," he writes, "but devotion to them had passed all bounds and led to deplorable superstition."⁵⁰ He goes on to question the teaching of Aquinas on the one hand and the "sweeping accusations" of Protestant authors on the other. He discredits the worst charges, but finds many of the popular practices of the day "offensive to our taste."⁵¹ Hughes is much briefer on the subject but to the point.

Here again [he writes] was a side of religious life that lent itself to abuse – to the exploitation of the pilgrim's generosity, for example, to the development of fables about the lives of the saints, of fables about the relics and the miracles wrought through them, and of a superstitious exaggeration of the place of these

⁴⁸ L. B. Smith, *Tudor Prelates and Politics* (Princeton, 1953), pp. 306-307, lists seven abbots, one Carmelite provincial, six monks or canons regular, and two friars who received bishoprics.

⁴⁹ H. F. M. Prescott's, *Man on a Donkey*, is particularly good in suggesting the conditions in a small convent and the general attitude of the Pilgrims.

⁵⁰ Maynard Smith, *Pre-Reformation England*, p. 174.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

various practices in a Christian's life. All of this was to supply the pioneers of the new Christianity with abundant material for criticisms of the old, and with material for an apparent justification of their savage and barbarous destruction of a whole world of beautiful things ... St. Thomas [More] does not deny the fact of abuses – ever; but he denies the Reformers' eternal assertion that the common practice was nothing but abuse, and of nothing is he so impatient – as a piece of deliberately wicked nonsense – as of their charge that the Catholic really took for God and the saints the images which he revered, or that he trusted to the actual images or relics to assist him.⁵²

The picture of abuses in the popular religion from which we cannot escape is not a pretty one, but, as I have already suggested, in cataloguing them it is easy to exaggerate and to distort. Despite the many failings of the clergy and the defects that had crept into the organization of the Church, despite the wilted reputation of the papacy and the appearance of heresy in the land, the country as a whole remained diligent in its practice of the old religion right up to the time of the break. Cardinal Gasquet's picture in *England on the Eve of the Reformation* may have been over-idealized, but a more recent and dispassionate authority, Pierre Janelle, has produced evidence of widespread popular piety.⁵³ Indeed, he claims that in the fifteenth century there is a marked improvement over the dark days of the late fourteenth century which followed the ravages of the Black Death. Among other things his investigations show that a surprisingly high proportion of the books printed in England in the sixty odd years between the introduction of the printing press and break from Rome were works of popular piety printed in the vernacular, lives of the saints, devotional manuals and the like, but no translations of the Bible which in England were suspect since the days of Wyclif. In contrast to familiar stories about the decay of church buildings he finds evidence in parish records of continued expenditures on church furnishings, and he points to the not inconsiderable achievement of late medieval ecclesiastical architecture in England (a point borne out by the well chosen illustrations of Hughes' first volume). In summing up at the end of his long introductory chapter entitled "*L'Angleterre religieuse de l'an 1500*" he comes to the conclusion that on the eve of the Reformation "the English Church, whatever its hidden weaknesses might be, appeared firmly situated and sustained by the faith of almost all its children," and he adds that the religious life of England at this time continued to be dominated by "a deep and intimate feeling for the supernatural."⁵⁴

This evidence of popular piety, whether it be in contributions made towards new churches and chapels, in the reading of religious literature, or participation in popular devotions, while forcing us to modify the traditional picture of religious apathy on the eve of the Reformation, complicates our problem by making it more rather than less difficult to explain the ease with which Henry severed the ties with

⁵² Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, p. 93.

⁵³ Pierre Janelle, *L'Angleterre catholique à la veille du schisme*, pp. 13-36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

the Papacy. Hughes recognizes this difficulty and suggests that the religious writing – and preaching – which inspired the last generation of English Catholics was lacking in balance. It was seemingly indifferent to theology and failed to lay the necessary stress on the Church’s role in the dispensation of grace – which was, of course, to be one of the targets of attack for the Protestant Reformers. The whole tone of this late medieval Catholicism in England was, he suggests, passive rather than active and not likely to steel the faithful to stand up to the perils which were to confront them.⁵⁵

One last factor remains to be considered and that must be done briefly. I refer to the strength of anti-clerical feeling in England on the eve of the Reformation, a phenomenon that has already been hinted at in our consideration of Church-State relations and of abuses in the Church. Nor is it necessarily contradicted by the evidence of popular piety just considered.

The two streams can flow alongside each other as they often do in some European countries today. Nor does anti-clericalism necessarily mean absence of Faith, although the deeper it penetrates the weaker Faith is likely to become.

The existence of a fairly widespread element of anti-clericalism in Henry VIII’s reign is a matter of common knowledge. There is no need to go into the cases of Richard Hunne and Dr. Standish, which are cited by every historian of the period as evidence of this fact.⁵⁶ Bishop Fitzjames was sure that his chancellor could not get a fair trial from a London jury, which as Hughes says, “seems a very revealing and extraordinary verdict for the bishop of the capital to pass upon the quality of the average Londoner’s Catholicism.”⁵⁷ This attitude was strongest among the rising business classes, the city merchants, the new gentry and the lawyers (sometimes loosely called the “middle class”), who envied the wealth of the upper and despised the ignorance of the lower clergy, questioned their various privileges, resented their exactions, and were annoyed by the shortcomings of their courts. These were the people who predominated in the Tudor House of Commons and when Henry VIII called the Reformation Parliament in 1529 he merely had to show them the green light to encourage them to embark on anti-clerical legislation. This did not necessarily mean that a break was inevitable. Henry had not yet come to that decision, but it was the thin end of a wedge that might be driven deeper with disastrous consequences. There had been some warning as early as 1515 when the clergy had been saved by the appeal of the powerful Wolsey to the king on their behalf. Now that Wolsey was gone they found themselves defenceless.

The sequel is well-known. After six years spent in seeking unsuccessfully a

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, pp. 98-101.

⁵⁶ The most recent detailed study of the subject. A. Ogle, *The Tragedy of the Lollards’ Tower* (Oxford, 1949) concludes that Hunne was murdered

⁵⁷ Hughes, *Reformation in England*, I, p. 150. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, pp. 109-110, makes some interesting observations on the combination of “active anti-clericalism” and “doctrinal orthodoxy” in England at this time.

papal annulment of his marriage, Henry, now with Thomas Cromwell, the real architect of the revolution, at his elbow, broke all ties with the Papacy by getting the Reformation Parliament to pass the Act of Appeals, one of the most significant statutes in Parliamentary history.⁵⁸ Other acts completed the rupture and settled the affairs of the new national Church over which Henry was supreme. Only one English bishop, one prominent layman and a small number of other clergy, mostly regulars, refused to take the required oath and suffered the consequences. Not until three years after the initial break was there a popular rising in the north, occasioned as we have noted by the attack on the monasteries, but it failed completely and several hundred more paid the supreme penalty. After that – silence, except abroad, where the King’s cousin, Cardinal Pole, and a few other exiles awaited the day of their return. Even Catholic Mary was temporarily forced to submit to her father’s will.

We come back then to our original question: How was it that Henry VIII effected the break with Rome with so little difficulty? We have seen that there were many interdependent factors influencing the situation and that inevitably historians will vary the stress they lay on any one, since it is so much a matter of opinion. The cult of humanism and the spread of heresy affected too small a segment of the population to precipitate the changes, but since the changes began they would obviously be important factors in directing its courses. Nor, despite the prevalence of abuses and the state of the Renaissance Papacy, was there any great popular movement for revolutionary reform. Anti-clericalism was a negative force, but it was a sign of weakness. There must have been much confusion created in the eyes of contemporary Catholics by this situation and they were sadly lacking in leadership. Perhaps no single factor was more important than the state of the episcopacy and all that implied. The generals were captured before the battle had begun. If the leaders had sold the pass – what leaders we have seen – is it so surprising that the rank and file of clergy and laity – given the existence of all the other factors – accepted the supremacy when it came, many perhaps with mental reservations, thinking that they were merely witnessing a temporary schism. Did not Henry talk of an appeal to a general Council and might not a general Council be superior to the Pope? The modern Catholic knows the answers to these questions, as perhaps did the better informed theologians of those days, but the pre-Reformation English bishops were more likely to be lawyers than theologians and the struggle went by default. Catholics of the generation of Allen and Campion saw the issue more clearly, but by that time for one reason or another the majority of their compatriots had decided the issue against them and England was well on the way to becoming a Protestant country.

⁵⁸ “It is the most important (Act) of the sixteenth century, if not of any century,” according to K. Pickthorn, *Early Tudor Government, Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1934), p. 201, a thorough study of the Henrician settlement on its constitutional side.

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