

# THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

BY  
F. M. POWICKE

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## PREFACE

THE essay here re-issued was written for the fourth volume of *European Civilisation: its Origin and Development*, edited by E. Eyre, and published by the Oxford University Press in 1936. I was encouraged by the editor to write as I wished and I adopted no editorial suggestions which were not advisable in the interests of accuracy and clarity. The late Mr. Eyre was a man of strong, sometimes of violent, opinions, but I found him a kind and forbearing editor.

Several people have expressed a wish that the essay might be issued separately, so that it could be more accessible to young students and to the general reader. Whether their desire was well-grounded or not, only time can show. Sir Humphrey Milford agreed to run the risk and was so good as to negotiate with Mr. Eyre's executors, who own the copyright. We are greatly indebted to the executors for permission to reprint this section of a big book.

Since this is a reprint, not a new edition, I have been able to make only a few corrections in matters of detail. These include an alteration in the first sentence, which has caused some misunderstanding. So short a work requires no index, but I have enlarged the table of contents. I have also added a list of recent books and papers which help to elucidate subjects to which I had referred. The list is not a bibliography; it refers to writings which I should have used if I had had access to them when my essay was in course of preparation.

I should add that the footnotes, which are few, are intended to guide the reader, not to indicate my authorities; but I ought to have referred to the help which I got from J.A. Muller's *Stephen Gardiner and the Tudor reaction*.

F. M. P.

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## THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND

### I. THE MEDIEVAL BACKGROUND OF THE REFORMATION IN ENGLAND. UNCERTAIN CONTEMPORARY OPINION. SIR THOMAS MORE

THE one definite thing which can be said about the Reformation in England is that it was an act of State. The King became the head of the Church, the King in Parliament gave a sanction to the revised organization, formularies, liturgy, and even in some degree to the doctrine of the Church. The King's Council and Ministers took cognizance of ecclesiastical affairs. The King co-operated with the bishops and convocation in the government of the Church, and he appointed commissions to determine appeals in ecclesiastical cases. All this amounted to a revolution. In earlier times there had, of course, been constant co-operation between secular and ecclesiastical authorities in matters ecclesiastical. Movements of thought tending to the isolation of the two authorities from each other had not been successful in the Middle Ages. Although there was much difference of opinion about the origin and rights of secular authority, some saying that it had a divine sanction as part of the nature of things, others contending that after the coming of Christ it was derived from the successors of Christ, that is from the Church, and in particular from the Pope, very few were prepared to deprecate it, to regard it as a necessary evil. Indeed, in the best thought, human society was one, held together and inspired by belief in and obedience to God in a visible Church which comprised all Christian people, but also directed in this life by various kinds of secular authority. As is well known, idealists still believed in the necessity, if not in the actual existence, of a single secular ruler, to whom other rulers could look as subordinate authorities looked to them; but this theory was going out of fashion before the Reformation. In actual fact secular authority was bound up with the traditions of the group or community in which it resided; it could be regarded as democratic in its origin, although its justification depended upon its harmonious reaction to the moral law. But it was not sufficient

in or for itself. It could not claim to lead its fraction of the whole Christian society in all the social activities of this life. It was so important that its co-operation was desired, it might be so powerful that the limits which it imposed upon the activities of the ecclesiastical authorities—who were linked together under the Pope in the government of the whole society—might have to be treated with acquiescence or even made the matter of formal agreement, but, strictly speaking, such limitations were forms of usurpation. For example, it was not unfitting that a King should have some voice in the election of a bishop; society was so intricate, secular and ecclesiastical functions so bound up together, that the royal licence to elect a bishop must be requested and given, and it was more than discourteous to elect a man who was not likely to be useful or was known to be distasteful to the King; or, again, friendly joint pressure on the part of King and Pope in favour of a particular candidate or a combined nomination actually overriding the electing body, might be advisable. But brutal insistence that such and such a man must be elected was a gross interference with canonical order. It would be hard to say, here and in many other ways, where agreement ended and usurpation began. The tactful exercise of Papal authority, by the use of dispensations or of the Papal 'plenitude of power', was required all the time in the later Middle Ages to oil the wheels. Yet that, ecclesiastically, society was one, greater than any political divisions, was a fundamental doctrine; nay, it was regarded as a natural fact. Hence the action of Henry VIII and his successors amounted to a revolution.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that the ease with which this revolution was effected was due to the prevalent system of compromise and not to any widespread belief in the necessity of change. As we shall see later, the momentous step was so easy that its significance was not faced. Facts, as usually happens, were more potent than theory, and when the time came for elaborate explanation, it was maintained that, as a matter of historic fact, the development of a united Christendom under Papal guidance had itself involved a gross usurpation of the rights of bodies politic, and that Christian unity was not bound



up with the supremacy of Rome. Indeed, so it was claimed, the usurpation of the Pope was such a monstrous perversion of the true nature of the Church as to stamp him as Antichrist. At first this re-reading of history was confined to a very few. Henry VIII and his Parliament were content with the statement, surprising enough to us, but a very significant description of policy, that 'by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an Empire . . . governed by one supreme head and king . . . unto whom a body politic, compact of all sorts and degrees of people, divided in terms and by names of spirituality and temporalty, be bounden and ought to bear, next to God, a natural and humble obedience.' In any 'cause of the law divine', it was within the power of the spirituality 'now being usually called the English Church' to declare and determine 'without the intermeddling of any exterior person or persons'.<sup>1</sup> To maintain the independence of England as against any foreign interference was the first concern. Hence in 1534 a definite 'conclusion' was proposed in accordance with royal mandate to the convocations of Canterbury and York and to the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge; it was in the simple form 'Whether the Roman Pontiff has any greater jurisdiction bestowed on him by God in the Holy Scriptures in this realm of England than any other foreign bishop?' There were four votes in favour of papal jurisdiction in the convocation of Canterbury, none in that of York. But the problems which are raised by the attempt to observe the 'law divine' in an independent state, and still more by the attempt to base national policy on the teaching of Holy Scripture, were not faced at this stage. Yet they are the fundamental issues in the development of the Reformation.

The cause of a united Christendom was not left without witness; yet it is to be observed that, with two great exceptions, only two or three cartloads of monks were willing to die for it. One of these monks, Dr. Richard Reynolds of Sion Monastery, had some reason for asserting that at heart the greater part of the

<sup>1</sup> Act in restraint of appeals, 1533, 24 Hen. VIII, c. 12.

kingdom was of their opinion, but opinion was not deep-rooted and was easily stifled by fear and bewilderment. Even the friars, the old militia of the church, were divided, and the practical opposition of a few was soon checked. The Carthusians, most remote from the world and also the least numerous in England of monks of the great medieval orders, were the most determined in opposition. The two great exceptions to the acquiescence of the laity and clergy were Bishop Fisher of Rochester and Sir Thomas More. After sentence had been passed upon him, More, for the first time, gave free expression to his views. No temporal lord could be head of the spirituality; just as a child cannot refuse obedience to his natural father, so the realm of England could not refuse obedience to the see of Rome. His isolation signified nothing: for every bishop opposed to him, he could call upon a hundred saints, against every parliament he could appeal to the general councils of a thousand years: You have no authority, without the consent of Christendom, to make a law or act of Parliament contrary to the common body of Christendom.

This was the witness of a man who had brooded long over the state of Christendom. He was wise, witty, urbane; observant, critical, caustic, yet full of pity. In his inner life he was austere, and could withdraw himself easily from the society in which he always shone, with a charm that captivated kings and bishops, nobles and all scholars, and brought him near to the common man. He found every place home in which he could be near to God. He believed as easily and intimately in the communion of saints as the ordinary citizen believed in the reality of the passer-by who jostled him in the street. Erasmus says of him that he talked with his friends about the future life as one speaking from the heart, with full hope; and it has been observed that what seemed to him 'the most terrible thing in the clamour for the plunder of church endowments was that it involved, not only social injustice, but the cessation of prayer for the dead': in his own words, 'that any Christian man could, for very pity, have founden in his heart to seek and study the means, whereby a Christian man should think it labour lost, to pray for all

Christian souls'. The two cardinal tenets in the religion of Utopia are the belief in Divine Providence and in immortality.<sup>1</sup> Such was More in his inner life. But he was also a public man, shrewd and clear-sighted, compact of observation and pity. He had no illusions about the state of Europe. He was not a fanatical churchman, nor a thorough-going papalist. Indeed it would appear that at one time he was ready to welcome a general council which might even depose the Pope. He was a leader in the new learning and interested in the discovery and exploitation of the empty spaces of the earth. What he could not stand was the denial of the unity of Christendom, and that men should take advantage of the troubles of the time to decry this unity for the sake of power or money. He could see no rhyme or reason in the incessant wars, no justice in movements which spoiled the poor, no wisdom in the destruction of great institutions and ancient loyalties because they were not all that they should be. Hence, while nobody was more conscious than he of the impossibility, if not the folly, of trying to restrain the individual conscience, he was indignant against all disturbers of the peace in matters of opinion. There he was least in line with the new point of view. The state of things was so precarious, so many people were so headstrong, vain, ignorant, and irresponsible, fostering schisms which they could not control. In his public capacity he would naturally be expected to issue, and did issue, certificates which would give effect to the ecclesiastical law against heretics; although it is untrue that he actively set the law in motion—which was not his business—and insulted or persecuted heretics, he would see no inconsistency with his general outlook on life in the attempt to suppress the spread of Lutheran doctrines, especially if they were expressed with clamour or ostentation. With the perplexed, on the other hand, he was patient and persuasive; his own son-in-law was for a time, while a member of his household, attracted by the new views. Similarly, he took no public part in opposition to the

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Chambers, *The Saga and the Myth of Sir Thomas More*, 1926 (Proceedings of the British Academy). Those who have read this fine essay—with the historical background of which I do not altogether agree—will see how much I am indebted to it.

royal policy and its developments. He refused to take the Oath of Supremacy, and rather than take it he died, but he would not have raised his voice if he had not been faced with the necessity of decision. Only if we had been in his position could we tell if his conduct was too cautious, whether he delayed unduly in putting his principles of order and loyalty before his duty to God. In his *Utopia* he had conveyed his deepest convictions in the fanciful form congenial to a child of the new learning. He was one of the first men to introduce the spirit of Plato into political discussion, but it never could have occurred to him, any more than it occurred to the long line of Platonic divines in the later Anglican Church, that his loyalty to the Church could be questioned. His Utopian people were dressed in Franciscan garb. They worshipped in the dark, mysterious, sumptuous churches which he loved. They recognized in European monasticism an institute with which they could sympathize. They would have nothing to do with violence and intransigence of thought. It is possible to push the analogy between the society of Utopia and the society of united Christendom too far, but the two societies are not inconsistent in principle. More wished to see, as so many idealists in the Middle Ages had wished to see, a really united and peaceful Christendom, striving energetically to prepare itself for the life with God, despising and rejecting capitalistic divisions in society, confident in the fundamental harmony of reason and beauty and law with the experience of the Church. Such faith in the possibilities of the future may well astonish us. For all his wit and shrewdness, Sir Thomas More was a dreamer, not reckoning enough with the untidy, disrespectful adventurousness in the spirit of man. He had no experience of the explosive power of conviction, whether it is right or wrong. But he stands out as the one person who saw quite clearly what Henry VIII's revolution meant; and, in the contrast between him and the people about him, 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. Other interests and loyalties were now so natural, so much a

matter of course, that, if need be, the old could go. The thoughtless could safely feel indifferent to them, not caring much what came to take their place. More's wife, Mistress Alice, could not understand why, for the sake of an oath, Master More should suffer himself to lie in a close filthy prison, shut up amongst mice and rats.

'Is not this house,' quoth he, 'as nigh heaven as mine own?' To whom she, after her accustomed homely fashion, not liking such talk, answered 'Tilly vally, Tilly vally.'

In the course of the century men gradually entered upon a view of life, or rather upon several views of life, very different from that of Sir Thomas More, though equally important in their eyes, and maintained with conviction and passion. Doubtless a few saw their way clearly, even in the early days of change. There had been little groups of men who at the universities had been inspired by the teaching of Luther. In various parts of England, for example in the Chiltern Hills and the Forest of Dean, were families which held Lollard views as part of their inheritance. The scepticism which frequently went with the new learning had in some minds, especially the minds of courtiers and men of affairs, given a sharper edge to religious indifference. But Sir Thomas More was undoubtedly right in thinking that he was faced by men who, for the most part, did not know and did not seem to care where they were going. The more light is thrown upon the feelings of men at this time, even of the inmates of monasteries, the clearer this incapacity for sustained conviction seems to be. There was widespread indignation against the King's treatment of Queen Catherine; the royal insistence that More and Fisher should declare themselves was probably due to the fear that, if criticism and passive resistance were not quelled in high quarters, the management of the public temper might become too difficult; yet the general acquiescence is one of the most mysterious things in our history, and remains, from the point of view of the historian, the chief explanation of the drastic treatment of the Church and the ruthless spoliation of the religious houses.

Our difficulty in comprehending the course of events is doubt-

less 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. Ecclesiastical opinion had become distracted by a long indulgence in compromise. The work of the Church had been done under the direction, first of great missionaries and bishops, then of great popes supported by men who were ready to suffer in the cause of unity, because they saw that only through unity could the work of the Church be done. In the course of this work, the organization of the Church had been perfected under Papal leadership. Probably the last really big Englishman to see clearly what this achievement involved was Robert Grosseteste, the bishop of Lincoln, who died in 1253. He saw, as he felt, with all the energy of his being. He was puzzled and distressed to find that what was so clear to him was so hard for others. In his eyes rights and duties were but different sides of the same thing, easily to be understood in the light of Scripture, the revelation of that law of nature of which they were expressions. It might be necessary to disobey the Pope and to suffer the consequences, but to disobey the Pope in the interests of man was unthinkable. The Church had in its keeping the moral and spiritual welfare of its children; it had contrived a system of law and administration which, within its own sphere, was supreme; it could not, without treachery to God and dishonour to itself, acquiesce in any interference with its courts by the secular power. The secular power, though inferior in status, had been devised to co-operate with the ecclesiastical in one great society; it had its own duties, rights, and functions,

subject to the law of God, and within its scope all honour and obedience were due to it. But in a case of conflict, whether in jurisdiction or policy, the ministers of God, and particularly the bishops, could not hesitate about the course they should take. They should keep themselves at liberty, and, in accordance with the canons, refuse to involve themselves in secular business. It was not for them to sit in secular courts as judges; they had their own duties, already hard enough, and if they did their work properly, even too much for them. So Grosseteste taught. Yet, as one reads his correspondence, one sees that the effort to maintain the ecclesiastical system without compromise was hopeless. To his colleagues, able and practical men as most of them were, this rigidity was tiresome. Why stress these dilemmas in a world already difficult enough? Here are two great powers for good, working together in God's service. Why should a bishop not act as a secular judge? Why should he, and the Pope too, not do a good turn to a royal servant who deserved well of the King and was in need of a benefice? If, in all kinds of ways, the law which was being defined in the royal courts was inconsistent with the Canon Law administered in the ecclesiastical courts, why not come to some working agreement, so that squabbles about advowsons, and tithes and legitimacy and wills and all the rest of it may cease? There was no question of heresy; England was quite free from the dangerous unrest which prevailed from time to time in the Rhineland and north Italy, in Champagne, and the south of France. If English ecclesiastics were too logical and stiff-necked, they would provoke in court-circles and among their lay patrons a persistent anti-clericalism and be forced into much closer subservience to the Papal court than was pleasant. For if, on the one hand, they had to face at home the constant intervention of the King and his judges in ecclesiastical administration, they were, on the other hand, increasingly at the mercy of Papal demands for taxes and benefices. Hence the English clergy, who had a strong national sense, tended to acquiesce in a middle course. And, for the sake of peace, King and Pope tended in the same direction.

It is this tendency to compromise which has caused so much

misunderstanding and perplexity to historians of the medieval Church in England. Every one 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, led by the learned William Prynne, thought that they could trace in the Middle Ages the gradual vindication of the royal supremacy, or rather of the secular law, over the law and administration of the Church. The high churchman of a later day has often thought that he could establish the existence of an independent *ecclesia Anglicana*, whose system of law, while influenced by that of the universal Church, had its own sanctions. 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. To-day it is hardly necessary to point out that compromise was practical and opportunist rather than a matter of principle. It was liable to interruption by the reassertion of principle at any time. It was like an uneasy truce between jurisdictions each of which claimed control over a strip of border territory, and it would have been unmeaning if the validity of each jurisdiction within its own domain had not been generally recognized. Yet the fact that both Puritan lawyers and high churchmen could see what they saw in medieval England is very significant. Their interpretations do reflect, with some distortion, the peculiarities of English ecclesiastical life after it ceased to be controlled by men like Grosseteste.

An adequate analysis of these peculiarities would require a discussion of English society as a legal and political organization. Here we must be brief. The main thing to be noted is the importance of the common law as an expression of the unity of England. In the later Middle Ages there was no State within the State. The laity in England, and also in other countries, had a parochial life and definite duties and responsibilities, social and moral, as members of the Church of Christ, but they had



no part in ecclesiastical organization. They were not faced by the dilemma of a decision between two forms of citizenship for the simple reason that the political organization was regarded as Christian, protecting the spiritual interests, not in opposition to them. If, for example, a man refused to accept the decision of an ecclesiastical court against him, he would be forced to obey by the secular power. In England the secular power was very penetrating. There were no ecclesiastical princes in England, no areas, with the exception (and from this point of view it was not a real exception) of the bishopric of Durham, in which a bishop or abbot was supreme; for the immunities of a great ecclesiastic were not marks of sovereignty, but of delegated royal power. Within his 'liberty', if he had one, he exercised the functions of sheriff or bailiff of the hundred, or, to put the matter more precisely, his officials took the place of royal officials and he received certain dues which were normally paid into the royal exchequer. He lived under the direction of the royal courts, within the sphere of the common law. Moreover he might be involved in secular duties, like any other citizen, as a minister of state, a royal commissioner, a member of the Great Council or House of Lords. His local prestige did not help him when he sat in the convocation of the clergy. Hence, although we hear a great deal about the *ecclesia Anglicana* we can trace no tradition in England of an organized body or church with an independent claim or status. As Maitland pointed out, the conciliar movement passed almost unnoticed in England. At one time there had been a possibility of a locally organized Christendom, in which the English convocation with its representative system of the clergy might have played a part, but in the fifteenth century we find nothing which corresponds in England to that movement in France which later, in co-operation with the Crown, was to shape the system of 'Gallican liberties'. Many of the clergy, many old established institutions like the Benedictine monastery of St. Albans, doubtless felt as definitely as the laymen that they belonged to England rather than to Rome. They were Englishmen, with an Englishman's dislike of the foreigner. They hated Papal taxation and Papal