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William Tyndale, Henry VIII and *The Obedience of a Christian Man*

One day in 1529, or so the story goes, Anne Boleyn gave Henry VIII a copy of *The Obedience of a Christian Man*.¹ The *Obedience* was a dangerous book. Its author, William Tyndale, was living in exile on the continent, his works having been condemned as heretical by the religious authorities in England. Although his latest book advocated non-resistance to monarchs, a sentiment that might please the King, it also contained Lutheran heresy, which Henry abhorred. Far from being angry, however, Henry is said to have been delighted with Tyndale's tract, saying 'this book is for me and all kings to read'.²

Historians have tended to accept that Henry read and approved of the *Obedience*. The story of the King's acquisition of the text has been repeated by Tyndale's modern editors and biographers, as well as by the biographers of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell.³ The authors of various works on the Henrician reformation and Tudor political thought have also given credence to some version of the story (although often with qualifications), and it has been described by Diarmaid MacCulloch as 'well-attested'.⁴

¹ William Tyndale, *The Obedyence of a Christen Man* (1528). The earliest extant edition of the *Obedience* is dated 2nd October 1528, but Tyndale indicated in a later work, *The Practyse of Prelates* (1530), sigs K9v-10r, that it had been published in 1527.

² John Louthe to John Foxe (1579), BL Harley MS 425, f. 144v.

³ S.L. Greenslade, *The Works of William Tindale* (London, 1938), pp. 10-11; J.F. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (London, 1937), p. 142-3; David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, 1994), pp. 209, 244-7. While doubting that Anne gave Henry a copy of the obedience, J.J. Scarisbrick wrote that 'it seems certain that Henry knew this diatribe and had been impressed by it'. See J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII* (London, 1968), pp. 247-8; David Loades, *Henry VIII* (Stroud, 2013), p. 223; Eric Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 132-3; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: a life* (London, 2018), pp. 110, 116, 139, 141, 146-7. Lucy Wooding, however, has suggested that the story may be apocryphal, see Lucy Wooding, *Henry VIII* (2nd edition, Abingdon, 2015).

⁴ MacCulloch, *Cromwell*, p. 110. See also Peter Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* (London, 2003), pp. 40, 177; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* vol II (Cambridge, 1978), p. 72; Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations* (Oxford, 1993), p. 106; John Guy, *The Public*

Henry's alleged approval of the *Obedience* has been linked to another important episode. Geoffrey Elton and others claimed that Henry – or perhaps Thomas Cromwell - tried to recruit Tyndale as a royal propagandist or diplomat in 1531.⁵ Stephen Vaughan, one of Cromwell's clients, sought Tyndale out in Antwerp and negotiated with him on the King's behalf, promising Tyndale safe-conduct if he would return to England.⁶ Henry, it is claimed, hoped that Tyndale's pen could be enlisted in support of his campaign for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Although these negotiations broke down, they seem to indicate that an alliance between Tyndale and Henry was both possible and desirable. Tyndale, it is alleged, believed that a 'godly King' such as Henry was the only force capable of reforming the Church. Henry was supposedly attracted by Tyndale's support for royal authority.⁷

The question of whether Henry read and approved of the *Obedience* or tried to recruit its author is important because the text has been credited with influencing the regime's thinking and propaganda on the issue of obedience.⁸ Tyndale's support for royal authority has been characterised as absolute and unequivocal. The tract

Career of Sir Thomas More (Brighton, 1980), p. 108; W.A. Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants, 1520-1535* (New Haven, 1964), p. 177; Stephen W. Haas, 'Simon Fish, William Tyndale, and Sir Thomas More's 'Lutheran Conspiracy' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 23:2 (1972), p. 127; Francis Oakley, 'Christian Obedience and Authority, 1520-1550' in J.H. Burns (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 177; Maria Dowling, 'Anne Boleyn and Reform', *Journal of Ecclesiastical history* 35:1 (1984), p. 36.

⁵ G.R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 91; G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England 1509-1558* (London, 1977), p. 129; MacCulloch, *Cromwell*, p. 139; Richard Rex, 'The crisis of obedience: God's word and Henry's Reformation', *Historical Journal* 39:4 (1996), p. 881; Korey Maas, 'Scripture, History, and Polemic in the Early English Reformation: the curious case of Robert Barnes', *Reformation* 14:1 (2009), p. 81.

⁶ MacCulloch, *Cromwell*, pp. 139-40.

⁷ F.L. Baumer, *The Early Tudor Theory of Kingship* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 89-90; A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London, 1964), p. 110; John Guy, *Tudor England* (Oxford, 1988), p. 121.

⁸ Marshall, *Reformation England*, p. 177; J.J. Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, p. 247; Guy, *Tudor England*, p. 122; Oakley, 'Christian Obedience and Authority, 1520-1550', p. 177. Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 242; Alec Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII: evangelicals in the early English Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 58-9; Stephen Haas, 'Martin Luther's 'divine right' kingship and the royal supremacy: two tracts from the 1531 parliament and convocation of the clergy', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 31 (1980), pp. 318-19. For a contrasting view, see Rex, 'The crisis of obedience', pp. 863-95.

was described by A.G. Dickens as ‘an unflinching exposition of the divine right of kings’, while J.J. Scarisbrick characterised it as ‘the first thorough-going apologia of Caesaropapism’.⁹ Brad Pardue has suggested that the *Obedience* offered Henry almost unlimited authority, while for Quentin Skinner, Tyndale and his fellow evangelicals arrived with ‘complete decisiveness’ at the conclusion that the monarch must be ‘obeyed in all things’.¹⁰ David Daniell claimed that the *Obedience* offered Henry ‘absolute, unlimited power’ and was thus ‘exactly what [Henry] wanted to hear’.¹¹ More guardedly, Peter Marshall has said that *some* refrains in the *Obedience* were ‘music for royal ears’.¹² The *Obedience*, it seems, was consistent with the regime’s own ideas and provided more or less unambiguous backing for royal authority, laying the foundation for a staunchly conservative tradition of evangelical thought that continued until the emergence of the ‘monarchomachs’ during the reign of Mary I.

Doubts have nevertheless been raised about whether Henry did in fact read and approve of Tyndale’s *Obedience*, or try to recruit its author. Even those who endorse the general outline of the story have described Henry’s approval as ‘unlikely’.¹³ G.W. Bernard has pointed out that the main source for the story was written many decades later.¹⁴ Richard Rex has raised further doubts, arguing that even if the King approved of the book’s support for royal authority, he would certainly

⁹ Dickens, *English Reformation*, pp. 110-111; Scarisbrick, *Henry VIII*, p. 247

¹⁰ Brad C. Pardue, *Printing, Power and Piety: appeals to the public during the early years of the English Reformation* (Leiden, 2012), p. 30; Skinner, *Foundations* vol II, p. 68.

¹¹ Daniell, *Tyndale*, pp. 242, 209. See also Guy, *Tudor England*, p. 121; Greenslade, *Works of Tyndale*, pp. 10-11; C.H. Williams, *William Tyndale* (London, 1969), p. 139; Ryan M. Reeves, *English Evangelicals and Tudor Obedience, 1527-1570* (Leiden, 2014), p. 25.

¹² Peter Marshall, *Heretics and Believers: A history of the English Reformation* (London, 2017), p. 177.

¹³ Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 244.

¹⁴ G.W. Bernard, *The King’s Reformation: Henry VIII and the remaking of the English Church* (London, 2005), p. 649, n 219. See also Thomas S. Freeman, ‘Research, Rumour and Propaganda: Anne Boleyn in Foxe’s ‘Book of Martyrs’, *The Historical Journal* 38:4 (1995), p. 806.

not have liked its Lutheran theology.¹⁵ According to Rex, the evidence that Henry tried to recruit Tyndale in 1531 is 'flimsy'.¹⁶ Karl Gunther and Ethan Shagan have questioned whether evangelical political thought was as conservative as it seems, arguing persuasively that support for royal authority was compatible with remarkably radical political ideas, although their focus was on evangelical authors other than Tyndale.¹⁷ Daniel Eppley has also argued that Tyndale's support for royal authority in the *Obedience* was more limited and conditional than it might seem, although he left open the question of whether Henry read and approved of the text.¹⁸

As we shall see, scepticism about these issues is well founded. The story of Henry's acquisition of Tyndale's *Obedience* was first recorded by John Louthe, Archdeacon of Nottingham, and an examination of Louthe's aims and sources raises fresh doubts about his reliability.¹⁹ Rather than delighting in his works, Henry appears to have been hostile to Tyndale and his writings both before and after this episode is supposed to have occurred. He was probably involved in an attempt to extradite Tyndale from the continent and suppress his works in 1528-9, and later evidence suggests that he viewed Tyndale's books as heretical and seditious. While Louthe's story might lead us to believe that the King made an exception for the *Obedience*, Henry was personally involved in banning the tract in 1530. Moreover, there is little to suggest that the negotiations carried out by Stephen Vaughan in

¹⁵ For Tyndale's theology see Clebsch, *England's Earliest Protestants*; Michael McGiffert, 'William Tyndale's Concept of Covenant', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXXII (1981), pp. 167-84; Ralph S. Werrell, *The Theology of William Tyndale* (Cambridge, 2006); Gergely Juhasz, *The Debate between William Tyndale and George Joye in Its Historical and Theological Context* (Leiden, 2015).

¹⁶ Rex, 'The crisis of obedience', pp. 871-2.

¹⁷ Karl Gunther and Ethan H. Shagan, 'Protestant Radicalism and Political thought in the Reign of Henry VIII', *Past & Present* 194 (2007), pp. 35-74; Karl Gunther, *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform in England, 1525-1590* (Cambridge, 2014).

¹⁸ Daniel Eppley, *Defending Royal Supremacy and Discerning God's Will in Tudor England* (Aldershot, 2007), pp. 19-32.

¹⁹ See Louthe to Foxe, Harley 425, f. 144r-v, printed in J.G. Nichols (ed.), *Narratives of the Days of the Reformation* (1859), pp. 52-7.

1531 were intended to recruit Tyndale as a royal diplomat or propagandist. These negotiations were instead part of a long-running effort to secure Tyndale's return to England, willingly or otherwise, so that he might abjure his heresies and be prevented from writing more seditious books. While it is possible that Henry ultimately hoped to recruit Tyndale once these objectives were achieved, this remains a matter of speculation. Vaughan's negotiations provide no evidence for this and it is unlikely given Henry's record of hostility.

Moreover, Henry's allegedly delighted response to the *Obedience* is difficult to reconcile with the radical and subversive content of the book. Despite its title, the *Obedience* did not advocate anything like the sort of obedience that would have satisfied Henry, and certainly not the absolute, unqualified obedience imagined by some historians. There has been a tendency to conflate Tyndale's narrow, minimal position - non-resistance to tyranny - with the much broader phenomenon of obedience. But for Henry, merely refraining from armed rebellion against a tyrant did not count as obedience, nor was the possibility that he was a tyrant something that he wished to dwell on. Tyndale's *Obedience* was highly critical of Henry, who was presented as being *worse* than a tyrant, and the book endorsed disobedience of various kinds.

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The first person to record the story that Anne Boleyn gave Henry a copy of Tyndale's *Obedience* was John Louthe, Archdeacon of Nottingham. Writing in 1579, Louthe presented the episode as the culmination of a tense court drama. Around 1529, he claimed, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey had tried to engineer Boleyn's downfall by

exposing her ownership of Tyndale's tract to the King, thus implicating her in heresy. Boleyn's mistake had been to lend the forbidden book to one of her ladies in waiting, Anne Gainsford. George Zouche, a young gentleman who was courting Gainsford, playfully plucked the book from her hands and refused to return it, becoming so obsessed with it that he read it in the royal chapel. Zouche was spotted by Richard Sampson, the Dean of the chapel, who seized the book and interrogated him about its owner, before telling the whole story to Wolsey. Far from being frightened by the confiscation of her book, Boleyn predicted that it would be 'the deerest booke that ever the deane or Cardynall tooke away'.²⁰ Before Wolsey could denounce Boleyn to the King, she got there first, presenting the *Obedience* to Henry and persuading him to read it. The King's unexpected delight at the tract meant that Wolsey's attempt to ruin Boleyn backfired spectacularly, and shortly afterwards, the Cardinal was himself driven from office. The story was picked up by the historian John Strype in the eighteenth century, from where it found its way into the historiography of the reformation.²¹

There are several reasons to doubt the authenticity of Louthe's story. Most obviously, his account was written fifty years after the events were supposed to have taken place. It was hardly a 'document of the time', as David Daniell described it.²² Louthe's account was apparently based on the testimony of George Zouche, who had died at least twenty years earlier.²³ This left plenty of time for errors and misunderstandings to accumulate in the retelling.

²⁰ Louthe to Foxe, Harley 425, f. 144v.

²¹ John Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials; Relating Chiefly to Religion and the Reformation* vol. I (London, 1721) pp. 112-14.

²² Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 244.

²³ Louthe to Foxe, Harley 425, f. 145r.

Louthe's account also had a clear polemical purpose. It appeared in a letter which was intended to furnish John Foxe with material for the next edition of his Protestant martyrology, the *Acts and Monuments*. In earlier editions, Louthe said, Foxe had omitted material 'that wolde dawnte *your* adversares, honor god, *comforte* his churche, & sett owt the myghty power of god'.²⁴ He hoped to bolster the authority of the next edition by fleshing out some of Foxe's stories and offering new ones.

According to Louthe, Henry's acquisition of Tyndale's *Obedience* had momentous consequences. It explained not just the fall of Wolsey, but the entire Henrician reformation. After Henry read the *Obedience*, Louthe wrote, the King's eyes were opened to the truth. He rejected the lies of the papists, and courageously led his subjects out of Babylonian captivity, scorning the threat of foreign invasion and rebellion.²⁵ This version of events was doubtless intended to rebut Catholic histories of the reformation that attributed Henry's break with Rome to his lust for Anne Boleyn rather than any principled sympathy with reforming ideas. Louthe evidently hoped to rehabilitate both Boleyn and the King, who he presented as the victim rather than the initiator of censorship, the unwitting dupe of clerical evil councillors who kept the truth from reaching him. The complicated and tortuous story of Henry's break with Rome and the religious turmoil that followed was reduced to a satisfying, dramatic moment of conversion. The ambiguities of Henry's religious beliefs, his persecution of heretics, his conservative positions on justification and the mass – and indeed the awkward fact that Tyndale opposed the divorce - were all quietly forgotten.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 134v.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 144v.

The story of Henry acquiring the *Obedience* also neatly conformed – or was made to conform – to Louthe’s providential interpretation of history. Louthe included it among a series of anecdotes designed to show the unfolding of God’s plan. In these stories, prophetic words came true, brave evangelicals miraculously avoided persecution, and the machinations of papists backfired.²⁶ Boleyn’s defiant warning that Wolsey and Sampson would rue the day they seized her book, and the spectacular way in which the Cardinal’s attempt to undermine her precipitated both his own downfall and that of the entire popish edifice in England fit this pattern exactly. Anne’s prophetic words are not the only unlikely detail in Louthe’s account. There is something suspiciously theatrical about the King’s thigh-slapping declaration that the *Obedience* was ‘a book for me and all kings to read’.

The fact that Foxe declined to incorporate Louthe’s story about the *Obedience* in the *Acts and Monuments* raises further doubts about its credibility. Although Foxe used some of Louthe’s material in the 1583 edition, he did not include the anecdote about Anne showing Henry Tyndale’s *Obedience*.²⁷ The story did not make its way into print until 1721, when John Strype, working from Foxe’s papers, included it in his *Ecclesiastical Memorials*.²⁸ Given Foxe’s eagerness to praise Anne Boleyn and to present Tyndale as a Protestant martyr, as well as his weakness for tales of hair’s-breadth escapes and providential punishments, this omission is puzzling.²⁹ One possibility is that he did not believe Louthe’s story and thought that including it would

²⁶ *Ibid.*, ff. 136r-139r.

²⁷ Nichols (ed.), *Narratives*, pp. 14, 18-19, 20-1.

²⁸ Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, p. 112-14.

²⁹ Freeman, ‘Research, Rumour and Propaganda’, pp. 807-10; John King, ‘The Light of Printing’: William Tyndale, John Foxe, John Day, and Early Modern Print Culture’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 54:1 (2001), pp. 60-1; Thomas S Freeman, ‘Fate, Faction, and Fiction in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs’, *Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), p. 603; John King, ‘Fiction and Fact in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*’, in David Loades, ed., *John Foxe and the English Reformation* (Aldershot and Brookfield Vt, 1997), pp. 14-15.

give further ammunition to his Catholic critics, who accused him of lying.³⁰ As the editor of Tyndale's works, Foxe must have known that his life and writings provided little evidence of royal approval. On Foxe's account, Tyndale had cried 'Lord, open the eyes of the King of Englande' shortly before his execution for heresy in 1536, which made little sense if Tyndale had already opened the King's eyes in 1529.³¹ The notion that Henry was decisively converted by the *Obedience* also contradicted Foxe's view that he vacillated between evangelical and conservative policies depending on which faction held his ear.³²

Foxe may also have omitted the story because he thought Louthe had confused it with a similar anecdote, already included in the *Acts*, about Anne introducing Henry to another evangelical text, Simon Fish's *Supplication for the Beggars*.³³ The *Obedience* and the *Supplication* were similar enough that they could easily be confused, and contemporaries frequently misattributed Fish's works to Tyndale.³⁴ If some version of this story is true, and the King approved of one of the texts, Fish's *Supplication* is a more likely candidate than Tyndale's *Obedience*, as it contained relatively little Lutheran doctrine and did not criticise the King.³⁵ It is also possible that Louthe confused the *Obedience* with various other books written to discredit Wolsey that may indeed have played some part in his downfall.³⁶

³⁰ For the reliability of Foxe, see Patrick Collinson, 'Truth and Legend: The Veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs', in Collinson, *Elizabethans* (London and New York, 2003), pp. 151-78; Patrick Collinson, 'John Foxe as Historian', *The Acts and Monuments Online* (http://www.johnfoxe.org/index_realm_more_gototype_modern_type_essay_book_essay3.html, accessed 28th July 2020); Freeman, 'Fate, Faction, and Fiction', pp. 601-24.

³¹ John Foxe (ed.), *The Whole Workes of W. Tyndall* (London, 1573), sig. B2v.

³² Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1583), p. 1158.

³³ Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, p. 163, n. 39. However, see also *Ibid.*, p. 385, n. 49; Freeman, 'Research, Rumour and Propaganda', p. 809.

³⁴ MacCulloch, *Cromwell*, p. 120; Mozley, *Tyndale*, p. 122; Haas, 'Simon Fish, William Tyndale, and Sir Thomas More's 'Lutheran Conspiracy'', pp. 127-31, 135, n. 2.

³⁵ D. Wilkins (ed.), *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* vol. III (London, 1737), p. 733.

³⁶ S.W. Singer (ed.), *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey* vol. I (London, 1827), pp. 181-3; Edward Hall, *Edward Hall's Chronicle* (London, 1809), pp. 759; J.S. Brewer (ed.), *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, vol. IV (London, 1875), pp. 2548-2555.

Louthe's account is not supported by contemporary sources. While Cardinal Campeggio complained about Lutheran books circulating at court in April 1529, the King only seemed to have heard of their contents at second hand.³⁷ In December Henry criticised the Pope's magnificence, which he said had been a cause of war and discord. While this was certainly an important theme of the *Obedience*, such criticisms were hardly unique to Tyndale.³⁸ In May 1530, Richard Nix, Bishop of Norwich, reported that the readers of heretical books in his bishopric were spreading rumours that Henry approved of them, but Henry was already in the process of rebutting this report.³⁹ No contemporary seems to have attributed Wolsey's fall to Henry's acquisition of the *Obedience*, and the episode is not mentioned by Wolsey's servant and biographer, George Cavendish.⁴⁰ The attempt to smear Boleyn for possessing the tract, if it occurred, seems to have done little harm to the career of Richard Sampson, Wolsey's co-conspirator: in October 1529 he was sent on an embassy to the Pope, which among other things was intended to secure the divorce.

It has been suggested that Louthe's story is corroborated by another text, George Wyatt's manuscript biography of Boleyn, which was probably written in the 1590s or early 1600s.⁴¹ The stories are certainly similar. Both involve a young suitor being caught with a heretical book that he had borrowed from a lady-in-waiting to Anne Boleyn. Boleyn is said to have gone to the King before Wolsey could accuse her, thus hastening the Cardinal's fall. In Wyatt's version, Henry only read selected passages that Anne had marked with her fingernail, rather than those points he

³⁷ Campeggio to Sanga 3rd April 1529, *Ibid.*, no. 5416.

³⁸ Eustace Chapuys to the Emperor, 6th December 1529, CSP Spain, 4 (i), no. 224.

³⁹ Richard Nix, Bishop of Norwich to [?], 14th May 1530, Cotton MS Cleopatra E V/2, f. 389r-v.

⁴⁰ Singer (ed.), *Life of Wolsey* vol. I.

⁴¹ BL Add. MS 62135, ff. 48r-65r, printed in Singer (ed.), *Life of Wolsey* vol. II, pp. 201-5. See also Mozley, *Tyndale*, p. 143; Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 246; Freeman, 'Research, Rumour and Propaganda', p. 809 n 37; Ives, *Anne Boleyn*, p. 133.

might disapprove of.⁴² Wyatt's source seems to have been one of Boleyn's ladies-in-waiting, presumably Gainsford.⁴³

While this story corroborates elements of Louthe's version, Wyatt never named Tyndale's *Obedience* as the text Henry read. The book in question is simply referred to as one of several works touching religious controversies and papal power. Moreover, Wyatt's chronology is muddled. He said that the book was published after Boleyn's marriage to Henry in late 1532, but the *Obedience* was printed at least four years earlier.⁴⁴ The book was supposed to have precipitated Wolsey's fall, but by 1532 the Cardinal was already dead. It was identified as Tyndale's *Obedience* not by Wyatt, but by the nineteenth-century editor of his biography, Samuel Singer. Singer had read Louthe's account of the episode in Strype's *Ecclesiastical Memorials* and sought to make Wyatt's story fit this pre-existing narrative, guessing that the *Obedience* must have been the book Wyatt meant.⁴⁵

II

Henry's alleged endorsement of the *Obedience* sits uneasily with evidence that he strongly disapproved of Tyndale and his writings. The religious authorities in England had been prohibiting and burning copies of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, as well as arresting and interrogating those who smuggled or possessed copies, since 1526.⁴⁶ Cardinal Wolsey, Archbishop Warham and others clearly led this effort, but there is some evidence to suggest that Henry was involved in an

⁴² BL Add. MS 62135, f. 58r-v.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 48v.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 58r.

⁴⁵ Singer (ed.), *Life of Wolsey* vol. II, p. 202, *n*.

⁴⁶ Craig D'Alton, 'The Suppression of Lutheran Heretics in England, 1526-9', *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 54:2 (2003), pp. 228-53.

attempt to extradite Tyndale in 1528-9. Between June 1528 and April 1529, Sir John Hacket, the English ambassador in the Low Countries, and John West, a Franciscan friar, sought to apprehend Tyndale, as well as his colleague William Roy and Richard Harman, a merchant involved in the sale of Tyndale's works, for heresy and treason.⁴⁷ They also bought up and destroyed copies of a recently published book attributed to Tyndale and Roy.⁴⁸ The book in question was almost certainly *Rede Me and Be Not Wroth*, which was later revealed to be the work of Roy and Jerome Barlow.⁴⁹

Although Wolsey clearly co-ordinated these efforts, Henry also appears to have been involved. The King wrote to Margaret of Austria, the governess of the Habsburg Netherlands, in the summer of 1528 and again in April 1529, requesting the extradition of Harman.⁵⁰ It seems unlikely that Henry would pursue Harman, who smuggled Tyndale's books, without having any involvement in the parallel effort to extradite Tyndale himself. Recent scholarship has suggested that Henry took a close interest in business carried out in his name.⁵¹ Indeed, when Herman Rinck, a resident of Cologne, responded to Wolsey's request for help in apprehending Tyndale, he sent a near-identical letter to the King, evidently believing that Henry was involved.⁵² There was also reason for the King to take a personal interest, since Tyndale was (wrongly, as it turned out) believed to have slandered Henry in *Rede*

⁴⁷ Hacket to Wolsey, 28th June 1528, *L&P* vol. IV, pp. 1938-9; Hacket to Wolsey, 14th July 1528, *Ibid.*, pp. 1971-2; West to Hacket, 2nd September 1528, *Ibid.*, p. 2037; Rinck to Wolsey, 4th October 1528, *Ibid.*, p. 2083; West to Wolsey, [March 1529], *Ibid.*, p. 2374; West to Wolsey, [April 1529], *Ibid.*, pp. 2405.

⁴⁸ Rinck to Wolsey, 4th October 1528, *Ibid.*, p. 2083; West to Hacket, 2nd September 1528, *Ibid.*, p. 2037.

⁴⁹ Jerome Barlow and William Roy, *Rede me and be nott wrothe for I saye no thyng but trothe* (Strasbourg, 1528); William Tyndale, *The Parable of the Wycked Mammon* (1528), sigs. A2r-3r.

⁵⁰ Hacket to Wolsey, 20th August 1528, *L&P* vol IV, p. 2022; Hacket to Wolsey, 13th April 1529, *Ibid.*, pp. 2403-5.

⁵¹ Wooding, *Henry VIII*, pp. 88, 99.

⁵² Rinck to Henry VIII, 4th October 1528, *L&P* vol. IV, p. 2083. See also TNA SP 1/50, ff. 145r-6v.

Me and Be Not Wroth.⁵³ As we shall see, Henry also tried to have Tyndale abducted in 1532, indicating that he was quite capable of pursuing him in Wolsey's absence.

Stephen Vaughan's attempt to persuade Tyndale to return from exile in 1531 provides more direct evidence that Henry disapproved of his writings. Everyone involved in these negotiations, including Tyndale himself, seems to have assumed that Henry thoroughly disliked his works. Almost the first thing that Tyndale said to Vaughan was 'I am enformed that the kinges grace taketh... displeasure to me for putting forth of certeyne boks'.⁵⁴ The King, he acknowledged, had clearly been angry with the publication of his works in the past.⁵⁵ Of course, by 1531, Tyndale had published the *Practice of Prelates*, which criticised the King's divorce. Nevertheless, it is significant that both Tyndale and Vaughan spoke of books in the plural. In other words, Henry was thought to be displeased, not just with recently published tracts like the *Practice*, but with Tyndale's output in general. There is nothing to suggest that the King only disliked *some* of his works, but delighted in the *Obedience* and considered it a book for all kings to read.

Henry's angry reaction to reading Tyndale's *Answer to Thomas More's Dialogue Concerning Heresies* in 1531 also suggests that he rejected Tyndale's entire oeuvre. The *Answer*, he said was 'fylled with Sedycyous Slaunderous lyes', but Tyndale's other works were also 'replet with so abhomynable Sclaunders & lyes... to infecte and intoxicate the peopull'.⁵⁶ Tyndale, he said, habitually spread errors and seditious opinions through his 'most vncharytable venemous and pestilent

⁵³ Rinck to Wolsey, 4th October 1528, *L&P* vol. IV, p. 2083; West to Hacket, 2nd September 1528, *Ibid.*, p. 2037.

⁵⁴ Vaughan to Henry VIII, [April 1531?] BL Cotton MS, Titus B. I., f. 69r-v.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 70r.

⁵⁶ Cromwell to Vaughan, [early May 1531?], BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X., f. 338r-v.

boks'.⁵⁷ While Henry probably objected to the *Practice* most of all, there is no reason to assume that he made an exception for the *Obedience*.

Henry not only seems to have disapproved of Tyndale's works in general, he also orchestrated efforts to ban the *Obedience* in 1530, shortly after Boleyn is supposed to have given him a copy. In May he set up a commission of theologians to consider the contents of various books that were suspected of containing 'detestable errors, and dampnable opynyons'.⁵⁸ The commission's report on the *Obedience* identified thirty errors, including the claim that purgatory and miracles did not exist, and that justification could be achieved by faith alone – a doctrine Henry consistently opposed.⁵⁹ The King was involved at every stage of the commission, inviting scholars to take part, consulting with them regularly, and summoning Justices of the Peace to enlist their help in rounding up heretical books.⁶⁰ A resulting set of injunctions was corrected in Henry's own handwriting.⁶¹ The King was also present on the 24th May to endorse the commission's condemnation.⁶² A proclamation followed on the 22nd June that banned the *Obedience* and several other works.⁶³ These 'blasphemous and pestiferous' books, the proclamation said, were intended not only to lead subjects to heresy, but to 'stir and incense them to

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 339r.

⁵⁸ For the commission, see Susan Wabuda, 'A day after doomsday: Cranmer and the Bible translations of the 1530s' in Kevin Killeen et al (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the English Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 29-33. Wilkins (ed.), *Concilia* vol. III, pp. 727-37. Chapuys claimed that this committee was only set up because of the publication of Tyndale's *Practice*, but the *Practice* was not mentioned in the committee's report or the subsequent proclamation. See Chapuys to the Emperor, 17th December 1530, SP Spain 4:1, n. 539. The commission also discussed an official translation of the Bible.

⁵⁹ Wilkins (ed.), *Concilia* vol. III, pp. 728-9.

⁶⁰ Henry VIII to the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge, 4th May 1530 in J. Lamb (ed.), *A Collection of Letters, Statutes and other Documents from the MS. Library of Corpus Christi College* (Cambridge, 1838), p. 26; Cromwell to Wolsey, 17th May 1530, L&P IV, p. 2869; Craig D'Alton, 'William Warham and English Heresy Policy after the Fall of Wolsey', *Historical Research*, 77:197 (2004), p. 354.

⁶¹ L&P vol. 4, item 6401, p. 2872, transcribed in Wilkins (ed.), *Concilia* vol. III, p. 719.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 736-7.

⁶³ Hughes and Larkin (eds.), *Tudor Royal Proclamations* vol. I, pp. 193-7.

sedition and disobedience against their princes, sovereigns, and heads'.⁶⁴ It is often claimed that Henry would have welcomed Tyndale's support for royal authority, even if he disliked his Lutheran beliefs, yet the commission's judgement – endorsed by the King – was that the *Obedience* was neither orthodox nor obedient.

III

It has been claimed that Henry, or perhaps Thomas Cromwell, sought to recruit Tyndale to royal service in 1531.⁶⁵ Tyndale has been described as a 'potential royal asset' and a target for 'seduction' by Henry, who allegedly hoped to use him as a diplomat or propagandist.⁶⁶ Louthe's account of Henry's delighted response to the *Obedience*, and this attempt to recruit Tyndale, seem to be mutually supporting pieces of evidence.

The immediate context for the supposed attempt to enlist Tyndale was not altogether promising. In December 1530, his *Practice of Prelates* was banned by yet another royal proclamation.⁶⁷ Tyndale's brother and a number of merchants who had circulated copies of the text were forced to march through London wearing pasteboard mitres bearing the words 'I have sinned against the commandments of the King'. They carried copies of the *Practice* around their necks, which they flung into the fire at the end of the procession.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶⁵ Rex, 'The crisis of obedience', p. 881.

⁶⁶ Marshall, *Heretics and Believers*, p. 178; MacCulloch, *Cromwell*, p. 139; Daniell, *Tyndale*, p. 210.

⁶⁷ Chapuys to the Emperor, 17th December 1530, SP Spain 4:1, n. 539. The proclamation does not appear to have survived - Chapuys reports that the King had all copies burned. However, see *L&P* vol V, Appendix, pp. 768-9.

⁶⁸ Rawdon Brown (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Relating to English Affairs in the Archives of Venice* vol. IV, 1527-33 (London, 1871), no. 642.

It is certainly true that Henry's representatives tried to persuade Tyndale to return to England and offered him safe conduct. Stephen Vaughan, a friend and agent of Cromwell who had already been involved in searching for heretics on the continent, was tasked with securing Tyndale's return while in the Low Countries in 1530-31.⁶⁹ After arriving in Flanders, Vaughan corresponded with Tyndale, securing a copy of his most recent work, the *Answer to Thomas More's Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, which Tyndale was preparing for publication, and sending it to the King.⁷⁰ In April 1531 he met with Tyndale outside Antwerp.⁷¹

Vaughan was keen to effect a reconciliation, and hoped that Henry would welcome Tyndale's latest polemic. As we have seen, however, when the King read the *Answer* he was disgusted by its tone and content. Cromwell drafted a letter to Vaughan that communicated the King's furious response and ordered him to cease all negotiations.⁷² Tyndale, Henry said, had done enough damage by publishing heretical and seditious works abroad; he would do much worse if he returned to England.⁷³ Rather than hoping for his return, the King was 'veray joyous to haue his Realme destytute of Such A person'.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Vaughan met with Tyndale again in May, repeating the offer of safe conduct, but Tyndale clearly distrusted the offer and would only return if the scriptures were published in English.⁷⁵ Vaughan made a final, unsuccessful effort in June, but negotiations petered out thereafter.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Vaughan to Cromwell, 3rd August 1529, *L&P* vol. IV, p. 2604.

⁷⁰ Vaughan to Cromwell, 1 December 1530, SP 1/58 f. 173r.

⁷¹ Vaughan to Henry VIII, [April 1531?] BL Cotton MS, Titus B. I., ff. 69r-70r.

⁷² Cromwell to Vaughan, [early May 1531?], BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X, ff. 338r-340v.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, f. 339r.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 338v.

⁷⁵ Vaughan to Henry VIII, 20 May 1531, SP 1/65 ff. 252r-254r. Vaughan clearly received some version of this draft, since his reply echoed some of its language. Nevertheless, it seems likely that Cromwell's final letter to Vaughan downplayed or omitted much of Henry's tirade, which would explain why he ignored the explicit royal order to cease negotiations. Vaughan also referenced a conciliatory message that was not included in Cromwell's draft.

⁷⁶ Vaughan to Cromwell, 19th June 1531, SP 1/66, f. 47r.

What was Henry trying to achieve in these negotiations? While it is possible that he ultimately hoped to enlist Tyndale as a diplomat or royal propagandist, the available evidence suggests a more modest aim: silencing Tyndale and persuading him to recant his heretical opinions. According to Chapuys, the furore sparked by the publication of Tyndale's *Practice of Prelates* in 1530 had given Henry a bad fright. The proclamation banning the book inadvertently encouraged subjects to discuss the divorce, stimulating demand for Tyndale's work. The King had been forced to burn not just the *Practice*, but the proclamation as well. Henry, Chapuys said, was now worried that Tyndale would write even more boldly against him, and hoped to make him retract what he had already said, so he sought to persuade him to return home.⁷⁷ Rather than enlisting his pen, the King appears to have wanted Tyndale to stop writing altogether.

Preventing the publication of further seditious material certainly seems to have been one of the main aims of Vaughan's diplomacy. One of his priorities was to delay the publication of Tyndale's *Answer to More* until the King had a chance to read and approve it.⁷⁸ Tyndale was persuaded to postpone publication, but he eventually claimed that printing had already begun and would be impossible to stop.⁷⁹ Vaughan also promised that the *Answer* would be Tyndale's last work, evidently believing that this would improve the chances of a reconciliation.⁸⁰

As well as silencing Tyndale, Henry's other aim was to make him recant his heretical opinions. From the beginning of Vaughan's negotiations, it was clear that

⁷⁷ Chapuys to the Emperor, 17th December 1530, SP Spain 4:1, n. 539.

⁷⁸ Tyndale to Vaughan, 22nd January 1531, BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X., f. 2r; Vaughan to Henry VIII, 26th January 1531, BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X., f. 42r; Vaughan to Henry VIII, 20 May 1531, SP 1/65 f. 253v.

⁷⁹ Vaughan to Cromwell, 25th March 1531, SP 1/65, f. 169r; Vaughan to Henry VIII, 20 May 1531, SP 1/65 f. 253v.

⁸⁰ Vaughan to Henry VIII, 26th January 1531, BL Cotton MS, Galba B X, f. 42v; Vaughan to Cromwell, 25th March 1531, SP 1/65, f. 169r; Vaughan to Henry VIII, 20 May 1531, SP 1/65 f. 253r.

Tyndale was expected to acknowledge his offences and humbly beg the King's pardon.⁸¹ As Cromwell wrote, Tyndale's return depended on his 'conversion and amendment'.⁸² If Vaughan could 'excerpt and take away the opynyons and fantasies sorely rooted' in him, and if Tyndale would 'submyt [him]self to... obedience and good order', the King would be inclined to mercy.⁸³ The same deal was to be offered to John Frith, another exiled writer.⁸⁴

It is possible, of course, that Henry ultimately wanted Tyndale to write propaganda for him or conduct diplomacy, but the correspondence between Vaughan and Cromwell does not provide evidence for this. The only indication that Henry wished to employ Tyndale came from Chapuys, who claimed that the priest would be offered 'several appointments and a seat in his Council' if he returned to England.⁸⁵ A seat on Henry's council was an unlikely promotion for a renegade priest, and it is likely that Chapuys was passing on exaggerated rumours.

The fact that Vaughan approached two other evangelical authors, John Frith and Robert Barnes, would seem to support the idea that Henry sought to recruit Tyndale. The evidence here is mixed. Henry's plans for Frith seem to have extended no further than having him return to England to abjure his heresies. When Frith did go home in 1531, it was without a safe conduct. He was arrested and (after Henry intervened personally) examined about his heretical opinions.⁸⁶ He refused to recant and was executed. The approach to Barnes was much more successful. He was asked by a representative of Henry (presumably Vaughan) to ascertain Luther's

⁸¹ Vaughan to Henry VIII, 26th January 1531, BL Cotton MS, Galba B X, f. 42r.

⁸² Vaughan to Henry VIII, 20th May 1531, SP 1/65 f. 253r.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, ff. 252v-253r.

⁸⁴ Cromwell to Vaughan, [early May 1531?], BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X, f. 340r.

⁸⁵ Chapuys to the Emperor, 17th December 1530, SP Spain 4:1, n. 539.

⁸⁶ R. E. Fulop, 'John Frith (1503–1533) and his relation to the origin of the Reformation in England', PhD diss., U. Edin., 1956, pp. 117-19.

opinion on the divorce in 1531, returning to England under safe conduct later that year.⁸⁷ After returning to the continent, he was part of a Lutheran embassy to England in 1534-5 and took part in subsequent negotiations on Henry's behalf.⁸⁸ While Barnes conducted negotiations for Henry, however, this does not by itself mean that similar things were expected from Tyndale or Frith. Unlike Tyndale, Barnes had direct links to Luther that could be exploited. His *Supplication*, unlike Tyndale's works, was not directly critical of Henry or the divorce. Moreover, while Barnes conducted diplomacy for Henry, he does not appear to have written propaganda for him.

Tyndale himself did not have any faith in the limited offer of safe conduct, let alone any deeper alliance with the King. As Vaughan wrote, it was difficult to persuade him to return to England 'when he dayly hereth so many thynges from thence whiche feareth hym'.⁸⁹ The news that troubled Tyndale no doubt included the public humiliation of his brother, the burning of his work, and the trial of another evangelical convert, Thomas Bilney, who was executed in August 1531. After their first meeting, Tyndale clearly feared that Vaughan would follow him to find out where he lived, and took steps to throw him off the trail.⁹⁰ Despite Vaughan's promises, Tyndale finally announced that he 'ne wold ne durste come Into Ingland'.⁹¹ Even if Henry offered him safe conduct, he said, his promise would 'shortly be brokyn by the perswasyon of the clargye'.⁹²

⁸⁷ Korey Maas, *The Reformation and Robert Barnes* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 24-5; Vaughan to Cromwell, 14th November 1531[?], Titus B I 368, f. 373r;

⁸⁸ Maas, *Reformation and Robert Barnes*, pp. 27, 31.

⁸⁹ Vaughan to Henry VIII, 26th January 1531, BL Cotton MS, Galba B X, f. 42v.

⁹⁰ Vaughan to Henry VIII, [April 1531?] BL Cotton MS, Titus B. I., f. 70r.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

Tyndale had good reason to mistrust the King. As we have seen, Henry may already have been involved in attempts to extradite him in 1528-9. When Vaughan's approach failed in 1531, Henry asked Charles V, in whose territories Tyndale was hiding, to arrest the priest for spreading sedition. The Emperor's response amounted to a refusal.⁹³ The King did not give up. In March 1532, he ordered Sir Thomas Elyot, who was in the Low Countries on diplomatic business, to apprehend Tyndale. Unfortunately, this was not easy. 'Hering of the kinges diligence in thapprehention of him', Elyot wrote, Tyndale had hidden himself away.⁹⁴

According to the traditional reading of this story, Henry behaved in a volatile manner, shifting unpredictably from delight to persecution to reconciliation to attempted abduction. He read and approved of Tyndale's *Obedience* in 1529, only to ban it in 1530. His anger subsided by the time he sought to recruit the priest in 1531, but after reading Tyndale's *Answer*, Henry embarked on another dramatic change of policy, seeking to kidnap the man he had hoped to employ. If we assume that Henry was consistently hostile to Tyndale however, although still inclined to mercy, this puzzle resolves itself. If, as the evidence suggests, Henry aimed at nothing more than silencing Tyndale and securing the renunciation of his heresies, there was no contradiction between burning his works and offering him a safe-conduct to return home. On this reading, Henry's attempt to abduct Tyndale when Vaughan's diplomatic efforts failed was a change of means, not ends. Of course, consistency was no great shibboleth for a monarch given to violent swings of temper, and it remains possible that Henry ultimately aimed to recruit Tyndale as a propagandist or

⁹³ Charles V to Henry VIII, [July 1531], *L&P* vol. V, no. 354.

⁹⁴ Elyot to Norfolk, 14th March 1532, BL Cotton MS, Vit. B. XXI., f. 54r.

diplomat, but to assume that this was indeed the purpose of Vaughan's negotiations is to push the evidence further than it will go.

IV

The idea that Henry was delighted by the *Obedience* and sought to recruit its author hinges on the notion that even if he disapproved of Tyndale's theology, the King was pleased by his advocacy of obedience to royal authority. According to this interpretation, it was only Tyndale's opposition to Henry's divorce in the *Practice of Prelates*, or perhaps his distrust of Henry's promises, that prevented a rapprochement. Aside from its theology, there was nothing in the *Obedience* for Henry to object to.

At first glance, the *Obedience* does seem to offer absolute and unqualified support for obedience. To resist divinely ordained monarchs, Tyndale said, was to resist the almighty Himself.⁹⁵ Even tyrants should be meekly obeyed, since God sent evil rulers to chastise his sinful people. This punishment should be patiently accepted – indeed welcomed.⁹⁶ Those who tried to correct their superiors with violence were taking upon themselves an office that properly belonged to God alone.⁹⁷ Such arguments were intended to refute accusations that evangelicals used scripture to encourage rebellion.⁹⁸

Yet in one important sense, all of this was beside the point. According to the *Obedience*, kings were largely irrelevant to the actual practice of politics, since they exercised no real power or agency. The authority that they were supposed to wield

⁹⁵ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, ff. 29r, 32r.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, ff. 6v-7r, 9v, 32r, 44v, 46r.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, ff. 10v, 30v, 47r.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 21r.

had been wrested out of their hands long ago by clerical evil councillors. 'The greates thinges of the worlde' Tyndale said, were all administered by the clergy, and lay rulers did nothing without their say-so.⁹⁹ The Pope and his bishops manipulated monarchs almost from birth, corrupting them with earthly pleasures and persuading them to tyrannise and exploit their subjects.¹⁰⁰ In case there was any doubt that these criticisms applied to Henry, Tyndale wrote that one of the methods by which the clergy duped monarchs was by conferring pompous and bitterly ironic titles on them like 'defender of the faith'.¹⁰¹

The result of all of this was that Kings were mere 'shadowes / vayn names & thinges ydle / havynge no thinge to doo in the worlde / but when our holy father neadeth their helpe'.¹⁰² Indeed, 'shadows' like Henry were *worse* than tyrants, because they allowed others to persecute subjects in their name, substituting the tyranny of one for the tyranny of many. 'It is better to haue a tyraunte vnto thy kinge', Tyndale wrote 'then a shadowe, a passiue kinge that doeth nought *himselfe* / but soffre other to doo with hi[m] what they will'.¹⁰³ Support for an idealised form of royal authority was thus entirely compatible with a condemnation of kingship as it was currently practiced.

The notion that the clergy had taken complete possession of temporal power allowed Tyndale to criticise recent English domestic and foreign policy with impunity, since it had allegedly been orchestrated by the prelates rather than the King. The bishops, according to the *Obedience*, used Henry's temporal power to persecute the godly, turning England into a virtual police state.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, the Pope

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 13r-v.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, ff. 41v-42r, 77v-78r, 155v, 156v.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, ff. 6r, 53v.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, ff. 38r-v, 80v.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, ff. 33v-34r

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, ff. 38r, 42r, 73v-74r, 80v.

persuaded the King to beggar and murder his own subjects in pursuit of ruinously expensive foreign wars that only benefitted the papacy.¹⁰⁵ While Henry and his propagandists insisted that ordinary subjects had no business meddling with state matters, Tyndale believed that even the 'worste in the realme' could tell the King when he broke God's commands.¹⁰⁶ Tyndale's presumptuous discussion of high politics, his opposition to the King's wars and the taxes raised to pay for them, and his insulting dismissal of monarchs in general as mere 'hangmen vnto the Pope and Bisshopes' would all have been deeply unacceptable to the King.¹⁰⁷

It is sometimes claimed that Tyndale viewed Henry as a potential 'godly prince', and sought an alliance with him as the only man strong enough to reform the church.¹⁰⁸ In fact, Tyndale's view of politics and religion was deeply pessimistic. While he believed that Henry *should* put down papal tyranny, he saw little sign that he would, because any loyal advisor who spoke out would be cast out of court.¹⁰⁹ Nor was Tyndale necessarily a supporter of royal supremacy.¹¹⁰ He denied that the spiritual estate was separate from and superior to the laity, and demanded that they be removed from positions of temporal power. But just because the clergy should stay out of politics, it did not follow that the king should control religious affairs. In particular, Tyndale showed no sign of believing that Henry should decide doctrinal matters - indeed the King himself did not claim this authority until later.¹¹¹ Tyndale

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 38v-39r, 41v-42r, 53v, 154v.

¹⁰⁶ 'Answer to the petitions of the traitors and rebels in Lincolnshire' in David Sandler Berkowitz *Humanist Scholarship and Public Order: Two tracts against the Pilgrimage of Grace* (London, 1984), p. 175; Richard Morison, *A Lamentation in which is shewed what ruyne and destruction cometh of seditious rebellyon* (1536), sig. A4r; William Tyndale, *An Exposition upon the V, VI, VII Chapters of Mathew* (1533), f. 28r-v.

¹⁰⁷ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, f. 80v.

¹⁰⁸ Dickens, *English Reformation*, pp. 110-11; Guy, *Tudor England*, p. 121; Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII*, pp. 58-9.

¹⁰⁹ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, ff. 78r-v, 154r.

¹¹⁰ Marshall, *Reformation England*, p. 42.

¹¹¹ Rex, 'The crisis of obedience', p. 875; Wooding, *Henry VIII*, p. 171.

did not anticipate the Henrician reformation or seem to think that it was likely to occur, and to see him as a potential enthusiastic supporter of Henry, let alone of the royal supremacy, is to read subsequent developments back onto 1528. In this respect, as in many others, Tyndale's *Obedience* owed a considerable debt to Martin Luther's *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* of 1523.¹¹² While Luther rejected rebellion, like Tyndale he argued that secular rulers - who were for the most part 'the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth' - had no authority to ban books or regulate belief, and should be disobeyed if they tried to do so.¹¹³

While the *Obedience* freely criticised the King, its rejection of rebellion was not as absolute and unqualified as it might seem. For one thing, the biblical justifications for obedience that it cited were not without their ambiguities and contradictions. Romans 13:3 suggested that rulers should be obeyed in part because they punished evil works, not good ones, yet the rest of Tyndale's polemic made it clear that rulers were not living up to this obligation.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the injunction in Romans to give obedience, honour, tax and rent to whom they were 'due' arguably gave the reader some leeway to decide what might be due to whom.¹¹⁵ At times, Tyndale implied that tithes and rents were payments for services rendered, suggesting that they should not be paid if priests and landlords failed to fulfil their side of the bargain.¹¹⁶ Monarchs, he said, should only raise enough to maintain

¹¹² Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* in Walther I. Brandt (ed.), *Luther's Works* vol. 45 (Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 81-129. For Luther's political thought, see Skinner, *Foundations* vol II, pp. 12-19, 81-88, 191-205; Oakley, 'Christian Obedience and Authority, 1520-1550', pp. 163-82; Jarrett A. Carty, *God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought* (Montreal, 2017).

¹¹³ Luther, *Temporal Authority*, pp. 83-4, 109-112, 113, 116.

¹¹⁴ Tyndale, *Obedience*, f. 33r.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 29v, 151v. This point was later made by Luther. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Warning to His Dear German People* in Franklin Sherman (ed.), *Luther's Works* vol. 47 (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 19.

¹¹⁶ Tyndale, *Obedience*, ff. 15r, 42r, 51r.

peace and defend the realm.¹¹⁷ There was no legitimate place here for Henry's cherished foreign military expeditions.

While the *Obedience* rejected rebellion, Tyndale expressed a certain sympathy with those who resorted to it. He could understand why ordinary subjects who were kept ignorant of the gospels and thus of biblical injunctions to obedience might be tempted to rebel, even if he did not condone it.¹¹⁸ Not everyone was able to turn the other cheek and meekly accept tyranny, particularly when the Pope had habituated subjects to unchristian violence.¹¹⁹ Even Jesus' disciples, he said, had been ready to fight to defend Christ when he was arrested, despite having heard his teachings on obedience and non-violence at first hand.¹²⁰

Once again, Tyndale's views seem to have owed something to Martin Luther, whose *Sincere Admonition* of 1522 had argued that bloody insurrection against the clergy, while forbidden, would be richly deserved.¹²¹ While Luther castigated rebels who participated in the German Peasants' War (as well as the princes who provoked it), he sometimes gave the impression of being less concerned with principled opposition to rebellion than with avoiding the blame if it broke out.¹²² In 1531, when it seemed as if Charles V might invade Germany to crush Lutheranism, he protested that although he had taught the people to suffer even the persecution of tyrants patiently, he could not 'create the doers of this teaching'. If the people rejected his prohibitions and resisted the Emperor, he said, 'so be it'.¹²³

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 154r-v.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 23r-v.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 23v.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 23r-v.

¹²¹ Martin Luther, *A Sincere Admonition by Martin Luther to all Christians to Guard against Insurrection and Rebellion* in Brandt (ed.), *Luther's Works* vol. 45, pp. 57-8, 61-2.

¹²² Martin Luther, *Admonition to Peace (1525) and Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants (1525)* in *Luther's Works* vol. 46.

¹²³ Luther, *Warning*, p. 13.

Even if subjects rightly rejected rebellion *against* the King, Tyndale said, they might also think that it was lawful to rebel *with* the King against the evil councillors who had usurped his power.¹²⁴ Of course, temporal government was ordained by God, but temporal government was currently wholly in the power of the clergy, who were supposed to preach, not rule. While tyrants were sent by God and should therefore be obeyed, the clerical tyrants of the present were the servants of antichrist, and their power was not supported by scripture.¹²⁵ Luther's *Warning*, although written after the *Obedience*, demonstrated how similar loopholes and exceptions could be found in even the most principled and absolute defence of obedience. The *Warning* argued that while insurrection (defined narrowly as a rejection of all law) was forbidden by scripture, self-defence against papist 'murderers and bloodhounds' was permissible.¹²⁶

Tyndale ultimately rejected any form of popular rebellion, arguing that subjects should suffer patiently and remit the punishment of even clerical evil councillors to God.¹²⁷ Nevertheless, his depiction of a realm persecuted, beggared and nearly destroyed by the clergy, with temporal power completely subordinated to an evil, anti-Christian papacy, clearly undermined royal authority. As Daniel Eppley has argued, this had the potential to encourage rebellion among those who were less scrupulous about biblical injunctions on obedience than Tyndale.¹²⁸

As absolute as Tyndale's support for obedience might seem, it also came with an important caveat. Subjects should obey the commandments of their rulers, even if they were tyrants, *except* if they were ordered to do evil, or to disobey God's law. In

¹²⁴ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, f. 23v.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 39v, 68r.

¹²⁶ Luther, *Warning*, pp. 19-20.

¹²⁷ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, f. 24r-v.

¹²⁸ Eppley, *Defending Royal Supremacy*, p. 27.

that case, they should follow God's commandments before those of man, although they should also accept whatever punishment an evil ruler inflicted on them for disobeying.¹²⁹ As critics like Thomas More pointed out, this exception left a great deal of room for disobedience, if not rebellion. Tyndale, More said, believed that various orthodox beliefs and practices, including clerical celibacy, holy days, the worship of saints and the sacrament were all against scripture. It followed that any law made to enforce these practices should be disobeyed.¹³⁰ As such, More said, Tyndale's condition for obedience was in effect 'a playne exhortacyon to dysobedyence and rebellion'.¹³¹ More might have added that for Tyndale, the persecution of evangelical reformers, the banning of English translations of scripture, Henry's divorce, foreign wars and the taxation needed to pay for them were all without scriptural warrant.¹³² Even if no rebellion occurred, it was difficult to see how Henrician government was supposed to function if every subject took it upon themselves to scrutinise royal commands and compare them with scripture before deciding whether to co-operate.¹³³ Of course, Henry would never claim that his subjects should obey ungodly commands either, but the apparent consensus on this principle hides an important practical disagreement: Tyndale thought Henry was issuing ungodly commands, and Henry didn't.

The commission of 1530 had claimed that Tyndale's *Obedience* was not just heretical but also seditious and disobedient. It is tempting to dismiss the commission's judgement as mere mudslinging from conservative theologians who

¹²⁹ Tyndale, *Obedyence*, ff. 77v-78r, 152r.

¹³⁰ Thomas More, *The confutatyon of Tyndales answere* (1532), sigs D4v-E1r. For More's works against heresy, see Thomas Betteridge, *Writing Faith and Telling Tales: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More* (2013), pp. 111-153.

¹³¹ More, *Confutatyon*, sig. D4v.

¹³² Tyndale, *Obedyence*, ff. 22v-23r, 38r.

¹³³ Eppley, *Defending Royal Supremacy*, p. 27.

aimed to undermine Tyndale and believed that heresy was seditious by definition. Thomas More argued that heresy was inherently disruptive of public peace, but he also criticised Tyndale's 'raylynge' against monarchs and the potentially radical implications of his call to disobey ungodly commands.¹³⁴ If Cromwell is to be believed, Henry seemed to think that Tyndale's works in general were slanderous and seditious.¹³⁵ We should not assume that the King found Tyndale's political thought acceptable, even if he rejected his theology, to the extent that it is even possible to distinguish between the two.

Tyndale's conception of obedience contrasted with that of the King and his propagandists. As Thomas Swinnerton insisted, subjects were obliged, not just passively to obey Henry, but 'to loue... to honoure, and ayde oure moste gracious prince, with all oure very hartis'.¹³⁶ The regime wanted active support based on inward conviction, not grudging outward obedience that went no further than withstanding persecution and abstaining from rebellion. Moreover, as Henry himself insisted in *A Glasse of the Truthe*, obedience was due to him, not simply because it was mandated by scripture, but because he deserved it. The King took infinite pains for the commonwealth, and obedience was the least he should expect in return.¹³⁷ Sticking with Henry against the Pope and his interdictions and excommunications was patriotic, virtuous and manly.¹³⁸ Henry's characteristic response to rebellion was shock at his subjects' ingratitude, a sentiment that was expressed in royal

¹³⁴ More, *confutayon*, sig. D3r-4v.

¹³⁵ Cromwell to Vaughan, [early May 1531?], BL Cotton MS, Galba B. X., f. 339r.

¹³⁶ Thomas Swinnerton, *A Litel Treatise Ageynste the Murtheryngne of some Papists in Corners* (1534), sig. C1r-v.

¹³⁷ Henry VIII, *A Glasse of the Truthe* (1532), sigs C4r, C7r. See also Swinnerton, *A Litel Treatise*, sigs B8r-v, C1r-v.

¹³⁸ Henry VIII, *Glasse of the Truthe*, sigs C4r, C7r, E1v-2r.

correspondence and propaganda during the Pilgrimage of Grace and beyond.¹³⁹ For Tyndale, subjects should refrain from rebellion even though the King was in the wrong. For Henry, they should obey wholeheartedly because he was in the right.

Tyndale's *Practice of Prelates* of 1530 expanded on many of the themes of the *Obedience*. Tyndale clung to his bleak, conspiratorial view of politics in the *Practice* even when there appeared to be some signs of reform. He dismissed the fall of Wolsey as a temporary feint, intended to mollify the Cardinal's critics while secretly preserving his power, and claimed that the reforms introduced by the parliament of 1529 were mere 'faces of reformacyons' designed to secure taxation.¹⁴⁰ Henry's divorce, rather than undermining papal authority, was just another of Wolsey's schemes.¹⁴¹ The *Practice* made tactless insinuations about how monarchs were 'entangled with hores' by the clergy and speculated that Henry might be motivated by 'a sette malice agenst the truth and... a grounded hate agenst the lawe of god'.¹⁴² It further muddied the issue of resistance by claiming that although rebellion was utterly forbidden, it could also be the instrument of God's righteous punishment. After all, God stirred the Jews to rebel against the Roman authorities after the death of Jesus, and had also inspired the German Peasants' War of 1524-5 in order to punish the popish clergy.¹⁴³

Historians have tended to argue that Tyndale rejected 'active resistance' and favoured 'obedience'.¹⁴⁴ While technically true, these claims are misleading. A

¹³⁹ Henry VIII, 'Answer to the Petitions of the Traitors and Rebels in Lincolnshire', 10th October 1536 in St Clare Byrne (ed.), *Letters of Henry VIII* (Newcastle, 1936), p. 143; Henry VIII, 'To the Rebels in Yorkshire', 2nd November 1536 in Byrne (ed.), *Letters of Henry VIII*, p. 152; Richard Morison, *An Exhortation to styr all Englyshe Men to the Defence of theyr Countreye*, (1539), sig. B2v.

¹⁴⁰ Tyndale, *Practyse*, sigs K2r-v, K3v.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, sig. H4r.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, sigs H2r, K9v.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, sigs A4v-A5r.

¹⁴⁴ Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII*, p. 59; Richard Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (Basingstoke, 1993), p. 26.

distinction must be drawn between violent rebellion, which Tyndale rejected, and disobeying royal commands or criticising the monarch (neither of which were particularly 'passive' actions), which Tyndale not only advocated in his writings but practiced himself. When under threat of persecution in England, he did not patiently withstand the worst that the authorities could do. Instead, he fled into exile, and published a series of tracts that were, as far as Henry was concerned, heretical and seditious. Tyndale was asked to delay the publication of a tract until Henry had approved it; Henry hated it but Tyndale published it anyway. When invited to return home by a messenger from the King, he refused. The attention that has been paid to non-resistance to tyranny in the *Obedience* has tended to obscure the radicalism and subversiveness of both Tyndale and his writings. Far from setting the tone for an essentially conservative tradition of political thought, Tyndale's *Obedience* suggests that from the very beginning, English evangelicals were adept at smuggling dangerous ideas and criticism of authority under a cloak of obedience to royal authority.