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Evolution of the English Reformation: Phase I (Henry VIII) and Phase 2 (Elizabeth I)

11 October 2003

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SYNOPSIS

The English Reformation, unlike that of the Continent, was initially brought about not so much by religious fervour for change, but more a matter of political expediency. Commencing at the time of *The Submission of the Clergy* in 1532¹ - a document establishing the authority of King Henry VIII over the English clergy – the Reformation proceeded to cut off not only the money supply to Rome, but to effectively remove any authority held by the Pope over English Bishops (and the King).

The rejection of the Roman headship culminated in 1534 when Henry VIII was declared Supreme Head of the Church of England, legislation which was quickly confirmed by the formal rejection of Papal supremacy by the church establishment.

It is proposed that Henry VIII's actions in all of this were not religiously motivated. His unwanted marriage to Catherine of Aragon, apparently the result of her inability to produce him a heir (son), and a desire to marry Anne Boleyn, lie at the root of the breach with Rome. The supreme headship on earth over the Church of England was a mechanism by which Henry VIII could work his way around the Pope's refusal to grant him a divorce from Catherine. Thus, Reformation in England could solve a royal problem. It was not a theological matter. Of course, the other by-product, almost certainly not lost on the King, was a re-directing of the church's funds to the state, that would have otherwise have found its way to Rome.

There were other far-reaching consequences of these events that affected the church even until the current day, representing the beginnings of Anglicanism². However,

¹ *The Submission of the Clergy, 1532* S.P. Henry VIII. v. no. 1023, I

² Anglicanism being one of the four traditions of Protestantism along with Lutheranism, Reformed and Anabaptists

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one of the more immediate consequences was the welding together of church and state – a phenomenon that would remain for a very long time to come³.

Despite a relatively short interruption to the flow of the Reformation, being the sovereignty of Edward VII (1547-53)⁴ and Mary I (1553-58), the general thrust established by Henry VIII continued with the reign of his daughter to Anne Boleyn; Elizabeth I (1558 – 1603). Thus begins the second phase.

Elizabeth I re-instituted much of the reforming legislation and decrees established by Henry VIII, albeit much in a revised form. The interruption by her immediate predecessor ultimately represented only a temporary slowing down of the whole Reforming process⁵.

Despite the political overtones, these events permitted the beginnings of religious reform. Even initially draconian measures such as legislation enforcing “spiritual procedure”⁶ and accompanying Book of Common Prayer instituted by Elizabeth I - and despite resistance by the church itself - had the ultimate benefit of allowing for the liturgical process to be practiced in English. Whilst for the time being there was an increasing concentration and consolidation of power vested in the state, the unstoppable establishment of Presbyterianism⁷ had begun.

³ In fact, England’s reigning monarch is still currently the head of the Church of England, although these days the exercising of power over the church by Queen Elizabeth II is more token than actual.

⁴ During this time the Reformation actually sped up

⁵ This was despite the active persecution of protestants by Mary I - or Bloody Mary as she became known – in a vain attempt to restore Roman Catholicism in England.

⁶ i.e. *Elizabeth’s Act of Uniformity*, 1559 1 Elizabeth, cap. 2: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt. i. 355. [G and H. lxxx]

⁷ According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica DVD (1999)*, the Presbyterian Church of England was organized in 1876 by merger of the United Presbyterian Church and various English and Scottish Presbyterian congregations in England. The United Presbyterian Church had resulted from the merger of some Scottish and English Presbyterian congregations in England in 1847. In England, Presbyterianism, like Congregationalism, had its roots in the Puritan movement within the Church of England. The Presbyterian Puritans who wanted the episcopally governed Church of England to adopt the Presbyterian system of church government made little headway in reaching their goal during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. However, it was not until the English Civil War (1642-51), which began during the reign of Charles I (1625-49), that the Presbyterian Puritans reached the height of their power.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

There is common agreement that the Reformation movement as a whole commenced with the posting by Martin Luther of his 95 theses⁸ on a Church door at Wittenberg in 1517. However, the English Reformation did not really commence until some fifteen years, and two popes later!⁹. Importantly, it had little to do with matters essentially spiritual, such as salvation through faith in Christ alone (one of the main thrusts of Martin Luther: as Thwaites¹⁰ puts it, the Reformers put the Word of God back at the centre of the Christian church).

Nonetheless, as for the Reformation generally, the English Reformation was evidenced by an attack on papal authority. Unlike Luther, whom was approaching this matter from a scriptural standpoint, in England the issue was related to King Henry VIII's desire to cut all ties to Rome due to the pope's refusal to grant a divorce to the king's wife, Catherine of Argon. This is a long way from Luther's theological attack on the perversion of the church's doctrine on redemption and grace, and in particular the indulgence system intertwined with the pope's authority, and the merits of the saints.

⁸ As stated by the *Encyclopædia Britannica DVD (1999)*, (article appearing "Ninety Five These"), ordinarily, Luther's theses would have been of interest only to professional theologians, but various political and religious situations of the time, and the fact that printing had been invented, combined to make the theses known throughout Germany within a few weeks. Luther did not give them to the people, although he did send copies to the Archbishop of Mainz and to the Bishop of Brandenburg. Others, however, translated them into German and had them printed and circulated. Thus, they became a manifesto that turned a protest about an indulgence scandal into the greatest crisis in the history of the Western Christian Church.

⁹ At the time of the Reformation's commencement with Luther's posting of his theses, Leo X was pope. This lasted until Pope Adrian XI whom presided during the period 1522 – 1523, whereupon subsequently Clement VII (1523 – 34) came to power.

¹⁰ Thwaites, J, *The Church Beyond the Congregation – The Strategic Role of the Church in the Postmodern Era* (Paternoster Press 1999), 17. Thwaites also comments that they took hold of the Biblical revelation and established the Protestant church firmly on that rock of God's revealed will

Therefore my conclusion is the English Reformation has its roots in political expediency, rather than spiritual revelation¹¹. Aside from Henry's VIII's desire to divorce his wife (and the removal of all ties with Rome providing the means to do so), this can be highlighted by the large timeline gap – consider that Henry VIII's reign commenced in 1509, eight years before Martin Luther's actions at Wittenberg, and some twenty three years before the *Submission of the Clergy* in 1532. Continental Europe may have been ready for change, but unlike there, in England the pace did not pick up until it became a matter of convenience for Henry VIII. This is despite an argument put forward by various commentators such as Shelley¹², that the Church in England had been moving toward independence from Rome for centuries.

At the time the English Reformation commenced, the Church in Rome was certainly already well under attack, with a Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation having begun at least twelve years earlier. Huldreich Zwingli of Zurich had also revolted against Rome in 1520, and there had been condemnation of teachings at Emperor Charles V's 1521 *Diet of Worms*. The Peasants Revolt (precipitated by the Anabaptists) had also occurred seven years earlier. Accordingly, events on the continent had already well and truly heated up by the time the English Reformation started.

PHASE 1 - THE REIGN OF HENRY VIII

We can be fairly certain that the burning theological issue of justification by faith, and not by works, was not foremost on the mind of Henry VIII when he repudiated papal

¹¹ This view concurs with Shelley B whom states in *Church History In Plain Language*, (Thomas Nelson, 1995), 264, that "If the Lutheran reformation began in a monastic cell, the Anabaptist reformation in a prayer meeting, and the Calvinistic reformation at a scholar's desk, then the English reformation began in the affairs of state, specifically with the problem of succession to the Royal throne."

¹² *ibid*, 265. The suggestion is that whilst there were many influences contributing to the break with Rome, succession to the throne was the primary constitutional factor in the transformation to the Church in England to the Church of England.

authority in 1534 after becoming incensed with Pope Clement VII's refusal to grant him a divorce.¹³

Paradoxically, the supreme headship over the Church of England was not something actually sought by Henry VIII. It was the revolution led by Thomas Cromwell whom in 1532 won control of England's governing council, that led to a decision that the English Church should separate from Rome. This was enshrined in *The Supremacy Act*, and later supporting legislation¹⁴. An unintended consequence of this would occur: the king would become God's deputy on earth, and accordingly the king married Anne Boleyn in January 1533. Nonetheless, the aforementioned early legislation was afterwards followed by *The Royal Injunctions (1536)*¹⁵ whereby, in a proclamation under Cromwell's name, the king's position was solidified as supreme head.

Another paradox was also presented: the King: earlier, in his book *Assertio septem sacramentorum adversus Martinum Lutherum (1521)*, he had attacked Luther and had expressed a profound devotion to the papacy. Henry had even been rewarded with the title of "Defender of the Faith". Now he had turned against the Pope; his act was equal to encouraging the Protestant Reformation.¹⁶

The religion of the newly independent church was for its head (Henry VIII) to settle: for the rest of his life. Henry, who apparently prided himself on his theological learning's, was to give much time and thought to the nature of the true religion. With the exception of the papal primacy, by all accounts he never gave up the main tenets

¹³ Such an action by the pope was never likely: not only was Catherine of Aragon the Emperor's aunt (Clement having been the Emperor's prisoner in 1527-28), but the pope was being asked to declare illegal an earlier exercise of papal power (Henry's marriage to his brother's widow) which in any event was of a kind that brought a good deal of money to the papal coffers.

¹⁴ *The Supremacy Act, 1534* 26 Henry VIII, cap. 1: Statutes of the Realm, iii. 492 [G. H. Iv], and the *Abjuration of Papal Supremacy by the Clergy, 1534*. G. and H. lviii (i) By the Convocation of Canterbury, Wilkins, iii. 769

¹⁵ *The Royal Injunctions (1) 1536*. Cranmer's Register, fo. 97b. [G. and H. lxii]

¹⁶ This would have been attractive to Cranmer (the new archbishop who had presided over the trial that declared the king's marriage to Catherine annulled), Cromwell, and perhaps Anne Boleyn - but not to Henry, who despised Luther.

of the faith in which he had grown up. Nonetheless, he changed his mind on details and arrived at an amalgam of his own in which transubstantiation and clerical celibacy mingled with radical views about the worldly authority of the church and man's ability to seek salvation without the aid of priests. This explains somewhat curious legislation being introduced such as *The Six Articles*¹⁷ which was, perhaps not unexpectedly, opposed by the Church hierarchy: on the one hand, it settled matters such as transubstantiation, but on the other made further doctrinal reform difficult to achieve since it was very prescriptive about such things as the continuation of private masses, the need for maintaining audible confessions to priests, and ensuring priests were disallowed from marrying.

Therefore, Henry must have been appalled to come under the direct and strong criticism of Rome, since the pope now held that “*King Henry has incurred the penalty of deprivation of his kingdom*”, and that he has “*been sundered for ever from all faithful Christians and their goods... deprived of Church burial*” and “*we smite them [him] with the sword of anathema, malediction and eternal damnation*”¹⁸. However, fortunately for him, this held little palatability for other European princes since, as stated by Bettenson¹⁹, “the pope had difficulty in finding any prince prepared to carry it into effect”.

Henry VIII, eventually six times married, became a very suspicious man, who, along with a string of eminent persons, condemned two of his wives to death by execution. Whilst superficially successful, in my opinion he had little idea where he was leading the nation, and was overwhelmingly preoccupied with personal issues.

Never really abandoning the fundamentals of the Roman Catholic faith, the beginnings of the English Reformation was unleashed by Henry's obsession with

¹⁷ *The Six Articles, 1539* From the Six Articles Act, 31 Henry VIII, cap.14 Statutes of the Realm, iii. 739. [G and H. lxxv]

¹⁸ Taken from *The Pope's Condemnation of Henry, 1535* Bull of Paul III, Eius qui immobilis, dated 30 August 1535. B.R. vi. 195 ff.; Mirbt, 426

¹⁹ Bettenson H, *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 254

matrimonial involvements, the eruption caused by internal revolution, and a grab for money²⁰ and power from an increasingly unpopular domestic church.

REFORMATION SPEEDS UP, THEN INTERRUPTED: THE REIGN OF EDWARD VI, AND SUBSEQUENTLY MARY I

Edward VI whom was Henry VIII's only legitimate son (his mother being Henry's third wife Jane Seymour), was a "boy king" whom only lived to 16 years of age, eventually dying from tuberculosis which completed his reign from 1547 to 1553. He has been described²¹ as a keen student of theology and had an intense devotion to Protestantism, however my view is that it is difficult, primarily because of his age, to forecast how his apparent extreme obstinacy, religious zeal and apparent narrow-mindedness may have impacted the Church of England, had he lived.

Notwithstanding, as Douglas²² points out, under Edward VI the church underwent a liturgical and doctrinal reformation, linked particularly with the two Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552, the latter being distinctly Protestant in character.

The turmoil of a complicated line of succession caused by Henry VIII's various marriages was not helped by Edward's determination that neither of his two half sisters (Mary and Elizabeth) would accede to the throne. Accordingly a power struggle developed after the his death, resulting in a more popular Mary I overthrowing the nine-day rule of Lady Jane Grey – Edward's choice.

²⁰ Evidence of this may be seen in *The Ecclesiastical Principle—The Dispensations Act, 1534* 25 Henry VIII, cap. zi: Statutes of the Realm, iii. 464. [G and H. liii], whereby it was legislatively directed that both money and documents were not to be directed by the Church to Rome. The reason given in the legislation was that "*subjects of [the] realm... by many years past have been, and yet be greatly decayed and impoverished, by such intolerable exactions of great sums of money as have been claimed and taken, and yet continually be claimed to be taken*", however it seems unlikely that Henry VIII truly believed in this high moral ground.

²¹ Article "Edward VI", appearing in *Encyclopædia Britannica DVD (1999)*,

²² Douglas J. (ed), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (Zondervan, 1978), 342

Unlike Edward VI whom made English rather than Latin compulsory for church services, Mary continued to celebrate mass in the old form in her private chapel. Furthermore, it would seem that Mary longed to bring her people back to the church of Rome, which would have been in direct defiance of what Henry VIII would have wanted²³. To achieve this end, she was determined to marry Philip II of Spain, however when this became evident, an unsuccessful Protestant insurrection broke out under the leadership of Sir Thomas Wyatt whom was eventually defeated and executed²⁴. Subsequently, Mary married Philip, restored the Catholic creed, and revived the laws against heresy²⁵. After leading an unpopular, unsuccessful war with France, she died in 1558 in London, and by my estimation, with her died all that she did.

It is interesting to note that the adverse features of the reign of both Edward VI, and then Mary I, included the diversion of funds for education, accompanied by many of the primary and grammar schools retrenching their operations or even disappearing altogether. Under Edward VI the *Chantries Act* was passed, confiscating the estates of the Church expressly for use in education. Significantly, it was Henry VIII, and later Elizabeth I, whom ensured significant and increased funding was made available for scholastic endeavours, especially grammar schools²⁶.

²³ In part, this may be explained by the fact that Mary I's early life was so tumultuous - by any standard. It is assumed that it played no small part in the way in which she eventually conducted herself as ruler. It included initial betrothal to, only to be jilted by, the Holy Roman Emperor (Charles V); elimination of her title as princess upon the marriage of Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn (whom hated her fiercely and forced her to act as lady in waiting to her daughter Elizabeth); and an offer to pardon her by her father Henry provided she admit to the "incestuous illegality" of his marriage to her mother. Nonetheless, although still considered illegitimate, in 1544 she was granted succession to the throne after Edward. Nine years later, she became Queen

²⁴ Those English noblemen who had acquired wealth and lands when Henry VIII confiscated the Catholic monasteries had a vested interest in retaining them. Therefore, Mary's desire to restore Roman Catholicism as the state religion made them her enemies

²⁵ After this, the Queen proceeded to relentlessly execute heretics, including 300 being burned at the stake; she was now known as Bloody Mary. Many of the Edwardian reformers were martyred. She was hated, her Spanish husband distrusted and slandered, and she herself was personally blamed for the vicious protestant slaughter.

²⁶ Article "*History of Education: European Renaissance and Reformation – The English Reformation*", *Encyclopædia Britannica DVD (1999)*, reports that Elizabeth I ... revived Henry VIII's educational policy; considerable sums were appropriated for education, even though it was not always possible to enforce the new provisions because of local opposition and some lack of concern on the part of the Anglican clergy.

PHASE 2 - THE REIGN OF ELIZABETH I

After the reign of Henry VIII, and a gap of eleven years (the period of sovereignty of Edward VI and Mary I), Elizabeth I succeeded to the English throne in 1558 and almost immediately restored the “Protestant settlement”²⁷. Her aim was to be Supreme Ruler – no Roman influence or authority was tolerable. This view concurs with Douglas²⁸ who goes a little further by stating that her aim was a “...*comprehensive, national, episcopal church, with the monarch as Supreme Governor*”. She effectively revived the status of the monarch via the *Supremacy Act 1559*²⁹ which was essentially first established by Henry VIII via the *Submission of the Clergy, 1532*³⁰, shortly followed by *The Supremacy Act, 1534*³¹. In the process, Anglicanism gained its classic *via media* statements³².

It is important to realise that England was by no means operating in a vacuum. By this time, a number of very significant events had occurred on the Continent. As part of the Counter-Reformation, the Council of Trent, confirming supremacy of the pope, and condemning the Protestant Reformation, had formed to re-establish doctrines of Catholicism which had been called into question as a direct result of Protestantism . European Princes had force the Peace of Augsburg, allowing princes to adopt either

²⁷ Also known as the “Elizabethan Settlement”, according to Douglas in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, 1978), 339, this refers to changes effected in English ecclesiastical affairs after the Protestant Elizabeth I had succeeded the Roman Catholic Mary in 1558. Briefly, these involved the abolition of once more of papal power in England, and the restoration of Henry VIII’s ecclesiastical legislation with penalties for recusants; and Act of Supremacy that declared the Queen to be “supreme of all persons and causes, ecclesiastical as well as civil; an Act of Uniformity accepting in the main Edward VI’s second prayer book....; and the dissolution of those monasteries that had been restored by Mary.

²⁸ *ibid*, 342

²⁹ *The Supremacy Act, 1559* i Elizabeth, cap. 1: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt.i. 350. [G. and H. lxxix]

³⁰ *The Submission of the Clergy, 1532* S.P. Henry VIII. v. no. 1023, I [a slightly different form in 1023, ii]

³¹ *The Supremacy Act, 1534* z6 Henry VIII, cap. 1: Statutes of the Realm, iii. 492 [G. H. lv]

³² This refers to the Church becoming not entirely protestant – i.e. Douglas in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, 1978), 831, explains that it developed as a *via media* between the former Roman faith on one hand and Protestant Calvinism on the other.

Catholicism or Lutheranism for their subjects. During the 1550's, Calvinism had also taken root in France, Poland, Hungary and Scotland.

The slower-paced reforms in England began to take up their momentum with the reign of Elizabeth I. This period has also been termed the *Elizabethan era*, since the increasing pace of change and the strength of leadership so impacted the nation. Not only did Elizabeth I re-establish the monarch's supremacy with all ties to Rome well and truly cut³³, but extreme and increasingly draconian legislation were introduced that made such things as even church non-attendance an imprisonable offence. Examples of this may be found in actions representing the culmination of Elizabethan anti-Roman legislation, namely the *Act Against Puritans*³⁴, and the *Act Against Rescuants*³⁵ in 1593, the latter which branded Catholics as wicked and seditious spies whom were "*hiding their most detestable and devilish purposes under a false pretext of religion and conscience*". Preceding this was an act³⁶ branding all Romanists as "potential traitors", with all Jesuit priests and other seminarists required to depart almost immediately from the country (even though they had arrive some 5 years earlier)! Such persons - priests of the "Romish Church" - were considered to be seditious, rebellious, and a danger to the safety of the Queen.³⁷

Furthermore, Bishops were even required to keep registers of anyone whom was found to be speaking or acting in a way that opposed the church in England.

³³ Although this time around the position had the softer, more acceptable "Supreme Governor" nomenclature, as opposed to "Supreme Head" – implying more administrative than legislative function

³⁴ *Act against Puritans, 1593*. 35 Elizabeth, cap 1: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt. ii 841. [G and H. lxxxvi]. In *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, 1978), 292, Shelley comments that "*the Puritan movement tried to reshape England with the first period under Queen Elizabeth trying to "purify" the Church of England along the lines of Calvin's Geneva*". My comment is that this went much further than a Lutheran style reformation, and irrespective, the Puritans at this point had failed.

³⁵ *Act against Rescuants, 1593*. 35 Elizabeth, cap. 2: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt. ii. 843 [G and H. lxxxvii]

³⁶ *Act against Jesuits and Seminarists, 1585*. 27 Elizabeth, cap. 2: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt. i. 706. [G. and H. lxxxv]

³⁷ The *Act against Jesuits and Seminarists, 1585*. *ibid*, stated that such persons "have been sent...into... England... to withdraw her highness's subjects from their due obedience to her majesty, but also to stir up and move sedition, rebellion, and open hostility within the same her highness's realms and dominions, to the great endangering of the safety of her most royal person, and to the utter ruin, desolation, and overthrow of the whole realm"

Also, with the re-introduction of the Prayer Book, the matter of prayer, sacrifice, rites, ceremonies and worship all became highly prescriptive. Interestingly, there were many critics of its form since, aside from the clergy now being forced into certain activities and formats, the Prayer Book (and the accompanying Elizabeth's *Act of Uniformity*³⁸) was held by many to represent a return to many Catholic traditions.

If the latter is true, then the implication is that Elizabeth's religious convictions may have been more Catholic oriented than Protestant, however the overriding issues of power and authority, and probably money, could not be ignored.

Of course, the Pope was not simply "lying down" and accepting all that had happened without question. Far from this, he was actively encouraging insurrection to the point where, in 1570, he issued a Bull³⁹ which, in announcing "*Elizabeth a heretic and an abettor of heretics... to have incurred the sentence of anathema, and to be cut off from the unity of Christ's body*", effectively called on France and Spain to war against England⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

Phase 1 of The English Reformation originally evolved due to matters of personal interest and political convenience. The legislative and other secular reforms conveniently, but perhaps unintentionally, allowed for the development of Protestantism (Anglicanism) in England. Whilst initially this meant firm control of the

³⁸ *Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity, 1559* 1 Elizabeth, cap. 2: Statutes of the Realm, iv, pt. i. 355. [G and H. lxxx]

³⁹ *The Papal Bull against Elizabeth, 1570* Bull of Pius V, Regnans in excelsis: B.R. vii. 810 ff. Extracts in Mirbt, 491

⁴⁰ This had the effect of reinforcing the Counter-Reformation with the pope insisting that outside his church, there was no salvation. It would not be until another half-century, during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), that there would be a tangible Roman Catholic Recovery in Europe but to my judgement, in England, to the least extent.

church by the state, this has since largely blown apart despite the continuing headship of the Church of England by the reigning monarch.

Phase 2, under Elizabeth I, represents a much more authentic attempt to restore the Christian faith (bible based religion) to England. Theologically, Edward VI paved the way for her – on the other hand, Mary I, a deep-rooted Roman Catholic, was thwarted in her attempts to put the Reformation to an end.

The installation of thirteen popes over the almost one hundred year period 1509-1603 ruled by essentially only two English monarchs (plus Edward VI and Mary I) could not manage to recover ground lost by the Roman Church as a result of the Reformation. The medieval church had become out of touch with the 16th century reality of changing economic practices, governmental structure and social values. These same issues remain a challenge, even for the “reformed” churches of today.

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