

What factors influenced the pace and extent to which the Protestant Reformation had spread by 1580?

By the 1580s, England under Queen Elizabeth was a securely Protestant country, a remarkable achievement for having come largely bloodlessly and certainly without the terrible cost in human misery that was the Thirty Years War over the same issue on the Continent. Yet at several stages not only did it not appear that the Protestant religion would end up triumphant, but even that there was a Reformation at all. Certainly if Henry VIII's religious settlement had remained the only break from Catholicism, then the dispute would have remained what contemporaries thought it was - another round in the old medieval power-struggle between the temporal and spiritual powers. This is certainly the case with France at this same period - with the dispute between the pope and Francis I eventually being settled to such an extent that France remained a Catholic country. In England, Henry's divorce and headship of the Church of England formed the only break with Rome - and a purely temporal not doctrinal one at that, as the firmness of the Six Articles shows. That the struggles did not end there can be explained not by any great ground-swell of opinion in England at the time - either for the new Protestant creed or specifically against the Catholic one. Certainly there is little evidence of a massive enthusiasm by the time of Henry's death for the Protestant cause: some historians have suggested that the number of people accused of the heresy of Lollardy shows that there was already a solidly Protestant strand in English religious thought - yet an analysis of the cases themselves not only shows an extremely vigilant church, manned with canon lawyers creating coherent heresies out of contradictory and heterogeneous beliefs; but more importantly it shows a widely-distrusted segment of society promptly denounced by churchwardens across the country. The same alertness could not be said of denunciations of Catholics later on. For there also does not appear to be any reason to suppose that the Catholic establishment was greatly failing to deliver its spiritual duties through corruption and misconduct. In visitations of over 1000 parishes in the diocese of Lincoln in 1514-21, only 25 cases were reported of priestly misconduct with women. Likewise in 1527-8, visitations of 230 parishes in the archdeaconry of Westminster found only 11 cases, while ten years later only eight priests were charged from 200 Norwich parishes.¹ Of course, there may well be many more unreported cases than these, but if anti-clericalism was a potent force, it seems unlikely that these would have remained un-denounced. In fact, quite the contrary - the numbers of denunciations of priestly misconduct grows rapidly under the Protestant church of Elizabeth. The Catholic Church *per se* had not seen its prestige diminish among the community, and the priest still provided local leadership and a focus for collective action. An example is the Pilgrimage of Grace, in which many northern rebels marched in parish groups led by their parish priest carrying the church cross. The church remained an attractive profession also for men of education, despite the greatly smaller number of benefices than ordinants. The numbers of candidates for ordination, especially in the 1510s and 1520s bear this out. The studies of Margaret Bowker show that the drop in these numbers came at precisely the moment when the attacks on church property, especially the dissolution of the monasteries, made church benefices look increasingly less secure as livings.

If the Reformation did not come about organically, in many ways it came about through deliberate policy on the part of the Crown. In Henry VIII's reign, the Church was brought - by clearly legal means under the Convocation - under the rule of the Crown. There was remarkably little opposition to this throughout the country - neither in Parliament nor in the localities. Certainly for every incident such as that in 1537 where a crowd of women attacked workmen attempting to dissolve St Nicholas's Priory in Exeter - there was a contented lay landlord who

¹ Haigh: *Anticlericalism & the English Reformation* p. 58

having received control over a new parish benefice now had a vested interest in resisting the return of the previous Catholic status quo. Indeed, during the rebellions of 1549, the Venetian ambassador reported rebels in 'Arvaschier' [Derbyshire/Warwickshire?] demanding a restoration of Henry VIII's religious settlement.² Subsequent developments in religious policy - since it touched the liturgy itself and thus had the power to actively create heretics rather than mere malcontents - became increasingly bitter. Most crucially, they still did not come about due to any regard to the feelings of the country, and remained purely matters dependent on the precise makeup of the Court at Westminster. As late as 1562, the Bishop of Carlisle felt able to say that: 'every day men look for a change' - religious feelings had not hardened for one camp or another. One Yorkshire gentleman, as reported by Palliser, was confident when he said in 1563 that 'the crucifix with Mary and John should be set up again in churches before Christmas.'

Therefore if the direction of religious policy was dependent on the Crown, its implementation was largely at the mercy of the Crown's capacity to govern. One first way to measure the power of the government must surely be in the strength of its response to rebellion. The Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536-7 foundered relatively harmlessly after its leaders were convinced to surrender, while the rebellions of 1549 again passed off relatively harmlessly when the major nobles maintained their loyalty to the crown, and gave the rebels no support. In this way, we can see quite plainly that the lay nobility generally saw their interests lying with royal command over the church. Margaret Bowker may have provided at least one reason for this with her analysis of the fate of clerical livings in the diocese of Lincoln before and after the dissolution of its monasteries: a dissolution which completely changed the pattern of church livings to the benefit of the king and individual lay families. Where religious houses had control over 40.5% of the total livings prior to 1536 compared to 35.5% in lay hands and less than 5% in the hands of the Crown; after 1536, the king had direct control over 21.5% and lay families 55% of parish benefices.³ When one bears in mind that during the Pilgrimage of Grace, rebels restored at least 16 of the 55 northern religious houses that had been dissolved, it can be seen how noble collaboration greatly aided the king's ability to enact his religious policy.

Despite tacit support from lay nobles, the actual processes of government depended as with all other forms of legislation on justices of the peace in implementation and on the courts in upholding them. In this respect therefore the Crown was forced to rely on officials who like the rest of the country held differing views from each other. As late as 1564 an investigation by the Privy Council discovered that 431 JPs were 'favourers of true religion', but 157 were adversaries and 264 'indifferent'. Four of the 'non-favourers' in Lancashire were still active as late as 1582, which not only goes to demonstrate the Crown's helplessness in its reliance on these agents, but also that in many areas of the country - such as Sussex and Staffordshire - the majority of justices remained Catholic. The Earl of Bedford, commenting on the Scottish marches, said that: 'there is never a justice of the peace nor none that he can command as meet for this purpose.'⁴ Likewise the Bishop of Hereford reported on that city's council: 'there is not one which is counted as favourable to this religion.'⁵ In many ways more effective at compelling compliance were the ecclesiastical commissions, which although originating in the medieval fight against heresy, maintained the powers to fine and imprison. Bishop Cotton of Exeter thought so highly of them as to say: 'those and many such abuses cannot be redressed by a due course of law, and therefore I do most humbly crave the help of an Ecclesiastical Commission.'⁶

² Palliser: *Popular reaction for the Reformation*

³ Bowker: *Henrician Reformation and the Parish Clergy*

⁴ Williams: *The Tudor Regime* p. 259

⁵ Williams: *The Tudor Regime* p. 259

⁶ Williams: *The Tudor Regime* p. 259

Yet even so the Crown had to acknowledge that it was only through the proper channels of the Church structure itself that they were ever going to ensure that Protestant reforms were accepted. In this they were greatly helped by the generally conformist attitude of most parishes - regardless of how truly they accepted the permanence of these. An example comes from the parishioners of Ashlower in Gloucestershire, who turned over their vicar to the authorities just in case: 'forasmuch as your poor orators and subjects be men not knowing whether the act done by the said vicar as afore be treason or no, and fearing that if so it should be that in not uttering they should not do their duties as your true subjects ought, therefore your said orators and subjects have in discharge of their duties opened and declared the said act of the said vicar.'⁷ This is of course an extreme example, and few other parishes were as prompt to do their duty even if the terms of it had been made explicitly clear - for which the normal method was via an episcopal visitation. In the turbulent years from 1536 to 1558 a surprising number of bishops succeeded in maintaining their sees - only Fisher went to the block under Henry VIII for example - and where conservatives were incumbent clearly the vigour of royal reforms was not transmitted well. Thus Edward VI's change of the liturgy was patchily enforced, and on Mary's accession the formal re-adoption of the Mass was unnecessary in many parishes. The rigorous episcopal attention to reform needed could therefore only fully come about when after 1559 all but one of Mary's Catholically-minded bishops was deprived of their sees, to be replaced by Protestants. Even so, episcopal visitations up as far as the 1570s seemed to merely bring up more examples of 'superstition' and 'idolatry.' A visitation in Sussex in 1569 for instance found altars, and declared that except for Lewes and Chichester, 'the whole diocese is very blind and superstitious for want of teaching.'⁸ At Milton and Sholden in Kent, images which had been pulled down by the commissary were promptly replaced by the local people. A more graphic account of the concerns of visitations comes from 1567 when the churchwardens of Aysgarth were sentenced to attend a service 'bare-headed, bare-footed and bare-legged', publicly to confess that they had hidden 'certain idols and images undefaced' had 'certain old papistical books in the Latin tongue', and after the communion service to burn them outside the church.

If this was the stick of church reform, lasting religious change only came about by the carrot of quality preaching from properly-trained theological graduates - and it is unsurprising that the government should make special efforts to ensure the compliance of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Fellows were given extra time after the Act of 1559 to come into compliance, while radical Protestants were tolerated - to good effect. The number of Protestants graduating in the 1560s helped to make up the shortfall in numbers of parish priests which had developed over the previous thirty years, while their effect was noticeable. Roger Edgeworth in Bristol 1554 said: 'Here among you in this city some will hear mass, some will hear none...some will pray for the dead, some will not; I hear much dissension among you.'⁹ The situation four years later, as reported by Thomas Hancock, was that: 'My lord[Somerset] said unto me that Hampton was a haven town, and that if I should teach such doctrine as I taught at Sarum the town would be divided, and so should be a way or gap for the enemy to come in.'¹⁰ - his preaching he boasted could convince half the town. Aside from Hancock's visible sense of self-importance, it was clear that the new generation of Protestant preachers were well-acquainted with their arguments, and given sufficient numbers and placements they - albeit gradually - had a great effect on local customs. The Earl of Huntingdon was proud of his role in 'doing all that I can to get good preachers planted in the market towns of this country'¹¹ - he and others like him were since 1536 able to control more livings in any case. It is noticeable that episcopal visitations after 1580

⁷ Haigh: *English Reformation Revised* p. 12

⁸ Williams: *The Tudor Regime* p. 259

⁹ Palliser: *Popular reaction for the Reformation*

¹⁰ Palliser: *Popular reaction for the Reformation*

¹¹ Williams: *The Tudor Regime* p. 268

generally do not complain about remnants of Catholic practices, but rather about other offences such as fornication, working on Sundays, failure to preach sermons etc. Interestingly enough for the theory that Catholic corruption was organically responsible for the Reformation's spread in England, cases against the clergy in church courts - few in number in the 1520s - increased from this time onwards, signalling perhaps a greater dissatisfaction with the Reformed rather than the unreformed Church. Haigh explains this by saying 'the single orthodoxy of late-Tudor England, a religion of spartan services and long, moralising sermons, provoked the popular anticlericalism, which even the mortuaries had not caused.'¹²

In any case, by 1580, the work both of government and church authorities in converting the country away from Catholic practices was largely complete. Where a Privy Councillor had said in 1549: 'the old religion is forbidden by a law, and the use of the new is not yet printed on the stomach of eleven of twelve parts in the realm,'¹³ this was no longer the case. Yet seemingly paradoxically, it was at this moment that governmental vigilance against Catholicism appeared to increase. The Counter-Reformation arrived in much the same manner as Protestantism had done fifty years previously - again with charismatic and well-informed preachers. Where previously Catholics or at least crypto-Catholics had been content to outwardly conform to Anglican practices, Counter-Reformist pressures now urged resistance. This new situation revealed the English Reformation for what it always had been underneath - a political statement for the benefit of the Crown and ruling classes as much as a spontaneous example of reforming religious zeal.

¹² Haigh: *Anticlericalism & the English Reformation* p. 73

¹³ Palliser: *Popular reaction for the Reformation*