

## Belief

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If Tudor history had gone just a little differently, then 1543 might be known today as the year of the 'Henrician Settlement'. For that year saw Henry's Parliament pass the Act for the Advancement of True Religion, which authorised a complete statement of the Christian faith to be held by the Church of England: *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christian Man, set forth by the King's Majesty of England*. The *Necessary Doctrine* – or 'the King's Book' for short – was a revised version of the 'Bishops' Book', a somewhat ambiguous text from which Henry had cautiously withheld his personal backing when it had been published in 1537. The King's Book went through a flurry of reprints in 1543 to make sure that the Gospel according to Henry reached his devoted people.

In general terms, the King's Book modified the Bishops' Book in directions that pointed back towards traditional Catholic doctrine and devotion. It explicitly excluded such Lutheran teachings as 'justification by faith only', affirming the role of free will and the importance of good works in the process of Christian salvation. Its claim that religious truth should be conveyed by the 'true exposition of the scriptures, according to the apostolical doctrine received and maintained from the beginning' was an implicit repudiation of the Protestant principle of *so/a scriptura* (scripture alone), which purported to base religious truth on nothing but the 'Word of God', without reference to 'human traditions'. And it not only upheld against 'sacramentarians' the full Catholic doctrine of the real presence, the transformation of the consecrated bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Mass, which it described in strictly Catholic terms as the 'sacrament of the altar', it also affirmed the propriety and value of prayer to the saints and prayer for the dead – two Catholic practices anathematised by almost all Protestant Reformers.

There is no doubt that Henry saw his book as finally settling the debates and disputes which had plagued his Church since the Break with Rome ten years before. His preface notes disapprovingly that some of his people have shown 'an inclination to sinister understanding of scripture, presumption, arrogance, carnal

liberty, and contention' – code for what we would call Protestantism – and he emphasises that his book is designed 'for the reformation of them' and 'for avoiding of such diversity in opinions'. This striving for doctrinal uniformity was a particular preoccupation of Henry's after he assumed the headship of the Church of England. His desire that all his people might 'uniformly be led and taught the true understanding' of the Christian faith shows that he saw this book, and the statute which sanctioned it, as in effect an 'Act of Uniformity'. He would certainly not have baulked at calling all this the 'Henrician Settlement'.

The vagaries of the Tudor dynasty were perhaps all that closed off that possible future. Had Henry lived to see Edward brought up to maturity in his own version of the faith, then England might have seen neither the lurch into Protestantism under the boy king Edward VI, nor the lurch back into fully Roman Catholicism under Mary I. And had the throne passed to Elizabeth after twenty or thirty years of 'Henricianism', then she would certainly never have dreamed of rocking the boat. But it was not to be.

The years between Henry's Act of Supremacy (1534) and what we might call his 'Act of Uniformity' had seen religious turmoil. The monasteries and nunneries of medieval England had been closed down (1535-40), their assets swept into royal possession, and their monks and nuns pensioned off. The daily round of worship in England's churches and cathedrals may have remained much as it had been for centuries, with the day marked out by the familiar round of matins, Mass, and evensong, but the religious festivals or 'holy days' that marked out the year had been winnowed out, especially in the summer months. Still more strikingly, the great shrines, such as Our Lady of Walsingham and St Thomas of Canterbury (which had drawn pilgrims from across the realm and from overseas) had been suppressed – their statues smashed or sold, their relics decently buried or crudely desecrated, their votive offerings in gold and silver melted down for the royal coffers. The whole apparatus of popular pilgrimage that underpinned the shrines, with its tales of miraculous healings, its processions and rituals and generous indulgences, was stamped out, dismissed as superstition, idolatry, and money-grubbing fraud.

The Bible itself, which for centuries had been protected beneath the decent veil of a sacred language, was published in English with full royal approval. For a hundred years or more the English Bible had been, in the hands of a common man

or woman, grounds for suspicion of 'lollardy' (heresy). Suddenly it was a badge of orthodoxy and loyalty. All the old certainties were called into question, and the alehouses and marketplaces of England buzzed as never before with theological debate and discussion - to the intense annoyance of the king, who felt that theology was best left to learned priests and princes such as himself.

Of course Henry had only himself to blame - though, of course, it never occurred to him to blame himself. His Break with Rome had shaken the foundations of the church. In the 1530s, those around him who were most committed to the Break with Rome were also those most favourable to new fashions in doctrine and devotion. For Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cranmer, and Thomas Cromwell, the Break with Rome was, in different ways, crucial to the attainment of their personal goals. And all three of them inclined towards the religious ideas which would come to be known as Protestantism, partly out of personal conviction and partly as a means of further justifying and consolidating Henry's new order, a new order which had borne them to the highest positions to which they could aspire. The tide of change that started to rise in 1535, and that continued, despite Anne Boleyn's fall in 1536, until 1538, owed much to their influence with the king.

But the international situation darkened from 1538, as a papal excommunication of Henry VIII coincided with an outbreak of peace between Francis I of France and Charles V, ruler of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. An awful prospect loomed, that of a crusade against Henry as the common foe of Catholic Christendom. Henry spent monastic loot on a frenzied programme of fortification and rearmament, but at the same time began to turn his foreign policy away from the pursuit of friendship with the Lutheran princes of Germany in an effort to mend fences with Francis and Charles. In this context he was keen to emphasise the catholicity and general traditionalism of his Church of England. This gave a chance to the more conservative faction at Court, led by the Duke of Norfolk and the Bishops of Durham and Winchester (Cuthbert Tunstall and Stephen Gardiner), who were also able to play on Henry's increasing worries about the spread of heretical ideas at the grass-roots of society. Their rising influence was seen in the passing of the Act of Six Articles in spring 1539, which made denial of the full Catholic doctrine of the Mass an offence punishable by death. Their triumph came in 1540, with the fall and execution of Cromwell on charges of heresy and treason (the charge of favouring heresy was perhaps plausible, though that of treason was evidently absurd, trumped up on perjured testimony from the same man, Richard

Rich, who had provided the crucial perjured testimony against Thomas More in 1535).

It was at this point, in 1540, that Henry set in motion the wheels that would lead to the publication of the King's Book three years later. A widespread consultation on the sacraments and other key doctrinal questions was carried out among the bishops and theologians of England, and then the detailed work of revision was entrusted to a commission of six men which included both traditionally-minded Catholics and the evangelically inclined (men of the 'old learning' and of the 'new learning' in the jargon of the time, albeit with a distinct bias towards the old). When the finished text was debated in Convocation in spring 1543, Thomas Cranmer opposed the condemnation of the Lutheran or evangelical doctrine of justification by 'faith only', and placed his arguments before the king. After much discussion, he bowed to the king's judgement. It may seem strange that this did not cost Cranmer royal favour, but, as Stephen Gardiner was later to recall, Henry 'suffered every man to say his mind ... till the matter were established by law'. Henry was careful to conform to the humanist ideal of the Christian prince as someone prepared to listen to unwelcome counsel: but only as long as the issue remained undecided. Once he had made up his mind, he expected obedient and loyal consent, which Cranmer was always ready to give.

The King's Book therefore stated that 'not only faith ... but also the other gifts of the grace of God' were required for justification, and Cranmer acknowledged himself convinced. In the next reign, as he led England rapidly into Protestantism, Cranmer claimed that Henry had been 'seduced' (i.e. misled) on the question of justification by faith. But as his great rival Stephen Gardiner slyly reminded him, he had never so much as hinted at this while Henry lived, not even when Henry, shortly before his death, commended his personal religious settlement to both of them.

Henry's marriage to the recently widowed Kateryn Parr on 12 July 1543 has sometimes been seen as mitigating the largely traditional religious thrust of the 'Henrician Settlement'. It is well known, or at least it has been widely thought, that Kateryn was a closet Protestant – or at least an evangelical sympathiser. The evidence for this, however, is not strictly contemporary, and it looks as though Kateryn's religious history may have been 'read backwards'. Certainly her *Lamentation of a Sinner*, with its conversion narrative, its insistent contrast

between 'God's word' and 'men's traditions', and its clear exposition of justification by faith alone, gives a distinctly evangelical account of the Christian life, flatly contrary to the teaching of the King's Book. But Kateryn's *Lamentation* was published in November 1547, nearly a year after the king's death. Even if it perhaps dated in some form from Henry VIII's reign, it is very different in character from the works that she published during her husband's lifetime.

It is far more likely that Kateryn's evangelical inclinations developed after she arrived at the King's Court than that she brought them with her. She first came to Court in Princess Mary's household in 1542, and that staunchly traditional princess would hardly have welcomed a known evangelical among her ladies-in-waiting. Moreover, the devotional books that Kateryn was to publish as Henry's Queen were redolent if anything of the conservative piety of Mary's circle. The *Psalms or Prayers taken out of holye scripture* (often known then as the King's Psalms) that she published in 1544 were mainly pastiche psalms originally composed in Latin by John Fisher, probably for Henry's personal use. Kateryn's choice of this work may have owed something to her almoner, George Day, Bishop of Chichester, formerly a client and chaplain of Fisher's (and also one of the editors of the King's Book). The mere fact that such a committed religious conservative served as her almoner calls into doubt the notion that she should be credited with evangelical convictions at this early date.

Kateryn's own *Prayers and meditacions*, published in 1545, were based on the impeccably orthodox *Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, and show no signs of Protestantism. An interest in Erasmian theology may have drawn her slightly further along the path towards evangelical beliefs. For Kateryn was the patron of a project to translate Erasmus's *Paraphrases on the New Testament* into English, and the first instalment to be completed was his paraphrase on Luke, dedicated to her by its translator, Nicholas Udall, in 1545. Udall's dedication (dated 30 September 1545) is outspoken in its rejection of the pope as Antichrist and of his religion as idolatry. Even if it stands just about within the Henrician limits, it makes its author's convictions plain. The strongly evangelical tone of this text would make it entirely plausible that, as John Foxe later reported, her new sympathies were manifest by 1546. For that year, according to Foxe, a conservative faction sought to bring her down by implicating her in a network of heresy in and around the Court that focussed on the person of the Lincolnshire gentlewoman Anne Askew, who was burned as a 'sacramentarian' on 16 July 1546.

But back in 1543 there was no hint of all this. The religious significance of Henry's marriage to Kateryn may be more truly reflected in the fact that the wedding was conducted by Bishop Stephen Gardiner, who in the 1540s was as much the figurehead of the conservatives in Henry's church as Cranmer was of the evangelicals. And it was shortly after the wedding that a storm broke over the head of Cranmer that might have cost him his life. Conservative churchmen had gathered a substantial dossier on the archbishop's systematic preferment and encouragement of evangelical clergy in his diocese, hoping to destroy him on the sort of charge of favouring heresy that had brought down Cromwell in 1540. Complex manoeuvres at Court and Council ensued, but in the end Cranmer's history of service and constant loyalty to the king preserved him from the snares of his enemies.

If 1538 saw the high tide of the Henrician Reformation, then 1543 saw its low-water-mark. In fact, the 'Henrician Settlement' was not to last long. Cranmer's survival of the crisis of 1543 was but one of many chances and contingencies that were to unsettle it. For the rest of Henry's reign, conservatives and evangelicals would jostle uneasily for position, with the former always nervous that their doctrinal Catholicism might be represented as 'popery' and therefore treason; and with the latter having to tread with particular care, lest their doctrinal evangelicalism take them beyond the bounds set by the King's Book and into heresy. Henry himself liked to think of his settlement as a 'middle way'. If so, it was a middle way between block and stake.

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