

Martin Luther in the England of King Henry VIII

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I. The Beginning

Professor Justo A. Gonzalez noted that "[t]he sixteenth century was one of the most convulsed periods in the history of Christianity."¹ The convulsion did not start overnight. In 1309, a French Pope, Clement V (1305-1314), relocated the pontifical see from Rome to Avignon, thus ending the golden age of medieval Christianity. This power struggle between France and Rome, is known as the "Babylonian Captivity" (1309-1377) and the "Great Western Schism" (1378-1423); precipitated when three Popes were elected simultaneously caused a debilitating erosion of the magisterium of the Church. This inexorable decline which came to encompass moral and material corruption at the highest levels of the hierarchy defied the salvaging efforts of well intentioned popes and Councils.²

Should I be surprised by Martin Luther's nailing of his *Ninety-Five Theses*³ onto the door to the Castle Church of Wittenberg? Shocked by the audacity and recklessness of this tormented Augustinian cleric⁴, perhaps, but surprised, no. Luther's attack against papal indulgences in 1517 can be viewed as simply that of setting a lighted match to the proverbial powder keg. After being ravaged by calamities such as the plague and corresponding economic debilitation⁵, and with the decay of papal credibility, many parts

¹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. II, (Harper Collins 1985), p. 122.

² Council of Pisa (1409), Constance (1414-1418), Basel (1431-1449), Ferrara-Florence (1438-1445).

³ Full title: *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (1517)

⁴ In 1512, Luther had been appointed Professor of Scriptures at the University of Wittenberg, and by this appointment, he was also a scholastic.

⁵ The economic disruption manifested in popular rebellions of the lower classes such as the Lollards, Taborites, flagellants, and the poor who followed the call of John Wycliffe, John Huss, and Hans Bohm.

and sectors of Christendom were ready for revolution. Luther, a brilliant, visionary man with sensitive guilt-ridden nerves, seized the moment and started the Protestant Reformation.

Of course Luther was not merely a revolutionary of actions and no words. For example, in writing *The Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*⁶ (1520), Luther breached the three walls⁷ which he saw as protecting the spiritual-cum-temporal power of the Roman Church. Following through with *A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), he demolished the Roman sanctum - the seven sacraments that according to Luther had imprisoned the laity. Finally, almost as a victory celebration, Luther puts forth *On the Freedom of a Christian* (1520). The availability of the printing press invented by Guttenberg (c1436) ensured Luther's thinking was widely known. The irascible nature of Luther inevitably comes out in these and other works.

II. Across the English Channel

How were these three great works of Luther received on the other side of the Channel? King Henry VIII had ascended the English throne in 1509 upon the death of his father, Henry VII. When the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* reached Henry VIII, the king, having received training in religion, responded with his own book, *Defense of*

⁶ Full title: *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*.

⁷ The three walls were: "First, when pressed by The temporal power, they have made decrees and said that the temporal power has no jurisdiction over them, but, on the other hand, that the spiritual is above the temporal power. Second, when the attempt is made to reprove them out of the Scriptures, they raise the objection that the interpretation of the Scriptures belongs to no one except the pope. Third, if threatened with a council, they answer with the fable that no one can call a council but the pope." Translation by C. M. Jacobs *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes Volume II* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915).

the Seven Sacraments (1521)⁸. This book thoroughly rejected Luther and dutifully vindicated papal dogma on all the sacraments as well as the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Sacrifice of the Mass. The response was Roman orthodox in that the papacy is also upheld although in less unequivocal terms. For this theological valor, a clearly pleased Pope Leo X granted the English king the honorific "Defender of the Faith." Henry had earlier in 1512, come to the aid of the Pope by joining forces with his father-in-law, Ferdinand of Aragon, against France.⁹

Henry VIII in 1521 was still married to Catherine. But the king's marital loyalty was not singular. History records that in 1519 he had, by his mistress Elizabeth Blount, a son, whom at the age of six, he dubbed the Duke of Richmond. A few years later, he developed a compulsive passion for Anne Boleyn. But more pressing was the fact that after over two decades of marriage, the only living child from Catherine was princess Mary, all the others having died in infancy. The succession of the house of Tudor was imperiled. The internecine disruption during the War of the Roses in the preceding century was fresh in the minds of the English. I believe Henry's desire to avoid the decimation of another cousins' war as that between the houses of Lancaster (red rose) and York (white rose) was the determinative reason for Henry's insistence for his right to marry again.

III. King Henry Turns To The Pope

⁸ The Latin title is *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. Critics of the work have suggested that Sir Thomas More had a part in its writing.

⁹ The Scots being allies of France was also defeated at the Battle of Flodden in 1513.

Not surprisingly, Henry first turned to Pope Clement VII, then a prisoner of Emperor Charles V, for the all consuming annulment¹⁰. The legal ground was that the dispensing Bull of Pope Julius II that allowed Henry to marry Catherine *ab initio* in 1509 (as she was the widow of Arthur his brother) had been obtained by false pretenses.¹¹ He seemed to be asking a Pope to void the declaration of a predecessor, but such grants were not unknown at that time. To advance his great cause, the king first sent his secretary William Knight and then Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York, the second most powerful man in England.¹² The earnest pleas of the papal legate notwithstanding, the Pope rejected them all.

Not to be thwarted, Wolsey, after having obtained favorable opinions of scholars from the great Universities of England and Europe, next arranged a trial in England. This scheme was frustrated by his fellow jurist, Cardinal Campeggio, who followed the bidding of Rome. Wolsey's failure caused his disgrace and early death. Henry now requested the aid of Thomas More, whom he elevated to the Chancellery, but to his disappointment, More was more interested in resisting Lutheran heresy than in solving the king's "Great Matter."

IV. Henry Turns Against the Pope

The king enlisted other councilors, Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell. The former in 1533 was made the Archbishop of Canterbury and he was the key doctrinal

¹⁰In the war between Charles V and Francis I, Clement VII was aligned with France; in 1526 Spain sacked Rome and the pope sought safety in the Castle of Sant' Angelo and thus became a virtual prisoner.

¹¹ The Levirate marriage law of the Old Testament (Genesis 38, see also Deut. 25:5-10) was no longer followed in Christendom - indeed the opposite was in effect - no man may marry his brother's widow.

¹² By 1515 Wolsey was Archbishop of York, Lord Chancellor of England, and a Cardinal of Rome. He also harbored an occasional desire for the papal tiara, an ambition that Henry supported.

architect of the Protestant Church of England. Here we see the beginning of the change in the theology of King Henry - he had acquired a dislike for the papacy. Besides the papal obstruction of his divorce, by the 1530's the maritime ambitions of Spain under Charles I (nephew of Catherine of Aragon and the same as Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire, after the death of his grandfather Maximilian I in 1519) was viewed as an incipient threat by the island nation against her developing commerce and sea routes to wealth.¹³ In England, Rome came to be viewed as a puppet of Spain.

Any papal disapproval notwithstanding, Henry's divorce had become an absolute necessity as a matter of English domestic politics and foreign relations. The king took back the matter into his own hands. In 1529 Henry summoned the Reformation Parliament and in seven years pushed through 137 statutes designed to enhance the political power of the monarchy and to emasculate the ecclesiastical reach of the papacy. Henry replaced the Pope as the final authority within the Church of England and bore the title "Supreme Head." Interestingly, the episcopacy was retained and the loyalty of the hierarchical clergy was channeled to Henry - by 1536, all ecclesiastical and civil officers were required to publicly approve of the break with Rome and take the oath of loyalty to the king.

Movement for religious reform such as that of John Wycliff and the more populist Lollards had already manifested in England. None had the revolutionary zeal or widespread impact of that started by Luther. Revolutionary change of religion had yet to find favor with the English (and the Scots as well). Furthermore, the crown had financial motivation to sever England's ties to Rome. Over the years Christianity in England had taken on a monastic design, one that was rich in both spiritual and material assets. By

¹³ By 1525 Charles V had become the most powerful man in Europe having defeated the French at Pavia.

taking control of the monasteries, Henry, perhaps having been rudely awakened by the opulence of Cardinal Wolsey, enjoyed access to the accumulated wealth of the English Church. Moreover, the pope was seen as being guilty of being slow in appointing bishops in England, thereby pocketing the revenues from vacant sees. The score was being evened.

V. Religion in the Latter Days of Henry

Henry finally was able to marry Anne Boleyn in 1533, after Cranmer had annulled the prior marriage. This did not solve the problem of male succession for she gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth. Within two years, Anne was accused of infidelity and beheaded. The third wife, Jane Seymour in 1537 rewarded Henry with a son who would grow up into a sickly young man to continue the Tudor line as King Edward VI. Sadly, Jane also cut short Henry's happiness by dying in childbirth.

After her death, the next marriage of Henry can be explained as being a matter of a decision to benefit foreign relations. During this time Henry developed a fear of both Charles V and Francis I of France. The rational recourse was to cozy up with the Lutherans, and accordingly, in 1539 Henry married Anne of Cleves, the sister-in-law of Frederick of Saxony, a famous Protestant prince. As the Lutherans persisted in demanding adherence to their doctrines, and as Spain and France failed to agree on making common cause against England, Henry quickly came to regret this marriage of political convenience. Branding Anne as "Flander's mare," and declaring to courtiers and ambassadors that he could not perform his marital duties because of her looks, Henry

set her aside with a handsome alimony¹⁴, and in 1540, married Catherine Howard, a 20 year old lady-in-waiting to Anne.¹⁵

The fifth queen favored the conservative party and the reformers became hard pressed. Moreover, in 1542 agreement was made with Charles V to again invade France and having no longer any need for a counterweight, Henry ended negotiations with the Lutherans in Germany.¹⁶ Church liturgy veered towards Roman rites except Henry refused to yield governance to the Pope and refused to return control of the monasteries. Happily for the reformers, Catherine Howard's liaison with lovers more her age resulted in her prompt demise in 1542.

The last queen, Catherine Parr was more of a nursemaid to Henry up to his death in 1547. To the chagrin of an aging and disillusioned Henry, she was a friend of the reformers and outlived the king.

VI. Luther & Henry's New Theology

Being imposed from above, the new theology remained mostly that of the English monarch. Compared with the theology of the continent that emerged from the minds of men such as Luther, and rising from the bottom up, the Church of England under Henry VIII remained very close in form to that of Rome. In 1521, Henry had chided Luther thus:

Wherefore, before I exhort, pray, and beseech, through the Name of Christ (which we will profess) all Christians, who are willing to look upon, and read *Luther's* Works, especially the *Babylonian Captivity*, (if he be Author of it) to do it warily,

¹⁴ Anne retired to the English countryside and was said to retain a great fondness for English ale and gambling and continued to be frequent visitor to the court of Henry.

¹⁵ In this year, the axe fell on Thomas Cromwell who had arranged the marriage with Anne of Cleves.

¹⁶ The Scots once again allied with France but at great expense to the English was defeated at Solway Moss in 1542. This, coupled with the rise of Calvinism and the preaching of John Knox in Scotland, eventually provided the means for the unification of the two kingdoms.

and very judicially; ... I wish the Author *may Repent, be converted, and live*; and, in Imitation of *St. Augustine*, (whose Rule he professed) correct his Books, filled with Malice, and revoke his Errors. If *Luther* refuses this, it will shortly come to pass, if Christian Princes do their Duty, that these Errors, and himself, if he perseveres therein, may be burned in the Fire.¹⁷

His disdain for Luther first manifested in his *Defense of the Seven Sacraments* appeared to reside with him all his life. Perhaps, it can be said of Henry that he embraced Protestantism not because he disliked the theology of Luther less, but he loathed the politics of Rome more. Wished as Henry may have to be seen as erudite in theology, the ordained architect was Cranmer. During the reign of Henry, Cranmer appeared to make every effort to lay a middle path between the continental storm that raged between the followers of Luther and the partisans of Rome, all the while seeking to keep control of the Church with the king. As a result, vacillations could be discerned in the liturgies of the Church of England: in 1536-1537 the Church received the Lutheran *Ten Articles and Bishop's Book*; in 1538, the Great Bible, a new English translation; in 1539 and 1543, the Catholic-leaning *Six Articles and King's Book*. The inclination of these books, like Henry's choice of consort, coincided with the foreign policy of England

Henry's Protestantism, not being firmly anchored in theology but adrift in politics domestic and foreign, tended to be tossed about by exigencies of state and does not make a rich study if deep theological roots are the treasures sought. Conversely, it makes a fine example of overall compromise as the political pendulum swung back and forth throughout the reign of Henry. The resulting Settlement (or Compromise as it is

¹⁷ *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum, Or Defense of the Seven Sacraments* by King Henry VIII. Project Canterbury transcribed by the Revd. Ed Renner 2001 at <http://www.justus.anglican.org/resources/pc/henry/reader.html>.

otherwise known) as indelibly instituted by his daughter Queen Elizabeth I is a common English religion of moderation, flexibility, and relative tolerance.

VI. The Mirth of Erasmus

With the benefit of hindsight, I would venture to say that it was Desiderius Erasmus and not Martin Luther who got the last laugh in England. Erasmus first visited England in 1498-99 and at Cambridge he met Thomas More, John Colet, Hugh Latimer, Robert Fisher and others. In 1506, his English friends helped him travel to Italy. While visiting again fellow humanist Thomas More in 1509, he composed *In Praise of Folly* (*Encomium Moriae*), his most famous work. Erasmus had even hoped to receive an office from Henry VIII but this proved not to be; he did hold a professorship of Greek at Cambridge for a short time. He suffered disappointment at the warlike nature of the English King and he left England. Nevertheless, the works of Erasmus were well read and respected in England. For example, in 1520, William Tyndale¹⁸ translated *Enchiridion Militi Christiani* into *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*. The king himself, Cranmer, and Cromwell were all said to be admirers of Erasmus and Henry did try to invite Erasmus back to England. Although he never returned to the Henry's land, Erasmus enjoyed the last laugh from the Tudor Reformation. This point is eloquently expressed by Dickens and Jones:

From the time of its first impact right up to the Elizabethan Church Settlement
Erasmian moderation and irenicism were fundamental though perhaps not always

¹⁸ Ironically, Tyndale while conferring with Luther on translating the Bible was betrayed by a friend and was arrested in Brussels. Despite the efforts of Thomas Cromwell and others to save him, he was tried for treason and heresy against the Church. In 1536, he was condemned, degraded from holy orders, strangled, and his body burned. His last words were: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes."

dominant elements in the direction of developments taken by the English Church.¹⁹

VII. Conclusion: A Taste of Things To Come

While Martin Luther started the Reformation as a lonely scholastic dissenter with no political power, Henry VIII imposed his Reformation on England as the established heir of the Tudor dynasty²⁰. Luther first survived the anger of the Pope, and later thrived by reason of the disagreements between Charles V, Francis I and the German princes. Henry too crafted his reformation with an eye to playing off the continental powers.

I view Henry's rupture with Rome as being motivated foremost by political and financial motives and least by religious reasons. Accordingly, Henry's reformation, with the aid from his clever lawyer, the new Lord Chancellor Cromwell, was accomplished top down by legal devices. Unlike the reformation on the continent, the English Reformation was never the result of popular social protest or learned religious dissent. The reformation in the island nation was Henry's response to the needs of the ship of state as England was tossed dangerously about in the storms of Europe.

Henry, after being legislated Supreme Head of the Church of England, acknowledged his triumph by making small changes in worship ritual instead of a massive revision of dogma. The religious force, as epitomized by Cranmer was but a weak doppelganger of the fury unleashed by Luther. In reciprocation, the English Reformation was accomplished with token bloodshed - that of the elite, e.g. the beheading of Sir Thomas More in 1536 (having replaced Wolsey, More's repudiation of

¹⁹ A. G. Dickens and Whitney R. Jones, *Erasmus the Reformer*, (London: Reed Books, 1994) p. 214.

²⁰ After growing up in expectant tranquillity and great preparation, the athletic and intelligent Henry VIII was hailed as England's spring after the long winter of the reign of Henry VII. The son of a miner and

Luther did not save him from royal wrath as he opposed Henry's divorce) and Cardinal John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester in 1535 (an unyielding defender of Henry's first wife, Catherine of Aragon). The population at large was spared the civil strife and destruction as was commonplace across the Channel and which in the next century would reach a bloody climax in the Thirty Years War. Respecting England, the great Humanist of Rotterdam was the one who got to laugh last.

By means of King and Parliament, England moved into a period of religious conformity under a new royal supremacy²¹. The English monarchy advanced from the medieval idea of Lords Temporal who oversaw the peace of the realm but who at all times was subject to the conscience of the Lords Spiritual, to the modern idea of the embodiment of the ideology of the nation-state. Henceforth the Tudor monarchs would rule absolutely; they, by *raison d'être*, would take turns to send churchmen of either the Protestant²² or Roman²³ persuasion to be burned at the stake.

At the close of the Tudor dynasty²⁴, Protestant England had emerged from the shadow of Catholic France (and Spain) and took a place as a world power, especially on the oceans²⁵. The regicidal wrath of the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell was yet a half a century into the future. I submit that the English reformation, while indeed conceived to serve royal needs, should be remembered as an encouraging example of religious change achieved through reason, experience, and moderation – a tradition that lives on today

foundry owner, Luther, had a overly strict, if not traumatic childhood; this experience was to remain with him the rest of his life.

²¹ A comparison may be made with the absolutism of Louis XIV of France.

²² E.g. the burning of Archbishop Cranmer, and Bishops Latimer and Ridley.

²³²³ In addition of clergy, a Catholic Queen, Mary Queen of Scots was a victim of the policy of Protestant Queen Elizabeth I.

²⁴ For reasons of state, Elizabeth did not marry, died as the “Virgin Queen,” and was without heir – the crown passed to James VI of Scotland who peacefully ascended English the throne as James I in 1603.

²⁵ The turning point was the wreck of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

through the Anglican Communion which in the United States is known as the Episcopal Church.

If Erasmus were alive, he would have been pleased.

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August 6, 2003