

To what extent was the henrican reformation imposed from above

[History](#)



The Henrican Reformation saw, or at least the prelude to the destruction of many traditional forms of piety: pilgrimages, shrines, worshipping of saints and most significantly the break with the key unifier of Christendom, the Bishop of Rome. Sir Maurice Powicke stated that 'the one definite thing which can be said about the Reformation in England is that it is an act of state',¹ thus radical religious changes were ultimately imposed upon an otherwise spiritually satisfied nation. It may however have been very presumptuous to have made such a sweeping statement.

The sixteenth century was a time of religion, but also a time of ideas, where the traditional religious structures were confronted with increasing criticism from all over Europe. Consequently lay the argument that this vein of reforming zeal was penetrating society far more extensively than it has once been assumed, hence far from an imposition from 'above' it was society that was 'ripe for Reformation'.² The reforming zeal of parliament was however, considerable in the period, and in many respects the Henrican Reformation was essentially spurred by politics.

Haigh stated that 'before the intrusion of political considerations which had little to do with religion, early Tudor England was not heading towards a Reformation'.³ There was supreme significance of the failure of Henry VIII to obtain the Pope's consent to annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. It contributed to the Reformation Parliament (1529), which was to embark upon a set of revolutionary statutes that were to lead to the break with Rome, and the establishment of Henry VIII as 'The Supreme Head of the English Church' (Act of Supremacy 1534).

The political gains of such a break, such as freedom from the ecclesiastical powers of Rome, and the financial spoils, were extremely attractive. It could give Henry both the answers to his martial difficulties; offer England the chance of a male heir and a solution to the England's financial difficulties. Certainly parliament started to exercise its muscles, and following the pramenuire accusations against the clergy their 'Submission' was presented in parliament, which gave into the Kings demands to monopolise their legal authority.

The slow eclipse of Convocation was finding its push from 'above', especially as there was a fair degree of bullying connected to the passing of statutes. The Treason Acts insured that the threat of imprisonment following rejection to carry out the will of parliament was ever strong, and a sScarisbrick noted 'fear was one of the king's best friends'. 4 A butcher of Windsor was hung outside the castle for sympathising with the participants of the reactionary movement, the Pilgrimage of Grace.

The curbing of Papal authority however may have seemed to many Protestant sympathisers, or even anti-clerics chance to push forward, or even 'impose' their doctrines. The circle around the King certainly included men who were interested to religious reform. Thomas Cromwell in particular used his position as vice-regent to the full. He helped pass a series of statutes that had a sideways glance in the direction of Protestantism. The Ten Articles (1536), for instance was a summary of what the Church believed in, and had a Lutherean ring to them.

It was significant for the sacraments that it was primarily concerned with, baptism, penance and the Eucharist. Additionally in 1537 it was made law that every parish should have a copy of the Bible in English. The Injunctions of 1536 and 1538 were also significant; they encouraged the discontinuity of shrines, the invocation of saints and pilgrimages. The Dissolution of the Monasteries (1539) also saw the consolidation of the monasteries wealth in the hands of the crown. One important factor to note is that most of this wealth was going upwards, in the sense that none went into the pockets of the laity.

It was a reform that whilst attractive for religious reformers was concerned with the filling of the crown's pockets. The biggest resistance to the Reformation was in fact the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536). Most of their demands pointed towards a reversal of what had been passed in parliament. 'The first touching our faith to have heresies of Luther, Wycliffe, Huss,... the works of Tyndale, of Barnes, of Marshall, of Rastell, Saint German and such other heresies of Anabaptists thereby within this realm to be annulled and destroyed'.

Far from showing any zeal the Reformation the Pilgrimage opposed the direction Parliament was moving towards. Additionally they demanded that '... the Parliament [should be placed] in a convenient place at Nottingham or York...'⁷ Such a declaration may indicate that what these people wanted was a greater say in parliament, and that they were fully aware of where the strings were being pulled from. Parliament was not only imposing its will on

them, but it doing it from so great a distance that the people felt that they had no way of shaping it.

This feeling of isolation contributes to Scarisbrick's argument that 'most men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came. '8 The Pre-Reformation Church has in fact been described as flourishing. The notion that the 'old order was still very much part of the fabric of society'⁹, can be readily supported by the continual examples of pious activities of lay-folk. Bequests were being invested into the services, requests for mass at one's death, saints were and shrines were still attracting pilgrims in abundance.

Church building, improvement and extension was also still very much alive during the period. Barton-Under-Nedwood in Staffordshire, in fact was actually built and rebuilt between 1500 and 1540, whilst the monasteries of Bolton and Bath were being built when the Reformation was in mid-flow. What is also interesting is who is paying for it. In Solihull the parishioners supplied seventeen labourers, and timber along with carriages for materials for the extension of the nave in 1533-34, ¹⁰ more significantly most of the income was voluntary!.

They were, in fact centres of pride, and it can be seen all over the country at this time local people putting into their own pockets to upkeep places that were soon to become under attack. They are continuous examples of people's attachment to the old system, rather than a resistance. If one looks at the sixteenth century wills there is evidence that traditional exercises were still very much in the forefront of people's hearts and minds. Although

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the wills are not indicative of a life devoted to traditional piety, it does mean that when it came to their last hour's people still thought it worth believing in Heaven, Hell and Purgatory.

One of the most interesting examples in that of Robert Burgoyne¹¹, a clerk of the Court of Augmentations. This was an agency concerned with the possessions from the dissolved monasteries. His will, in 1545 actually gave as bequests the vestments that he had taken from the monasteries! Yet what is surprising is that fact that here is a man who should have realised that placing money into the old system was relatively futile, yet this did not deter him. Was there in fact part of him that believed the old order would continue, or did he actually, regardless of the current vein still believed in the old system?

People after-all do not invest money into a system that has very little future. Shrines were also attracting a considerable amount of attention. In fact, as late as 1538, William Barlow, Bishop of St David's, lamented to Cromwell that a supposedly miraculous candle that burned before Our Lady in Cardigan Priory was 'now used for great pilgrimage'¹², despite Cromwell's Injunctions that had ruled against such practices. Clearly traditional practices were still very much believed in, and no amount of higher moves against them could deter people from worshipping such shrines.

Popular attitudes were to a considerable difficult to reform. Additionally religious guilds were also popular. They were organisations, usually concerned with a craft but were primarily concerned with religion. They often supported a parish church, organised members funerals or the saying of

mass after their death, hence the belief that prayers would reduce the days spent in purgatory or collected for the local saint. They gave lay folk a considerable amount of status within the community and the guild often employed its own priests to carry out religious services.

In fact membership was actually increasing before the Reformation, take for instance Stratford's Holy Cross, who between 1529-1530 enrolled 29 living members and received 53 payments for dead members. 13 Considerably a greater part of people's psychologically was still caught up in tradition. This almost fear factor in the system, of purgatory, the unknown after death, may have spurred a considerable amount of anti-clericalism, and also relief once it was no longer practiced.

Depth of popular devotion, in fact can be verily embellished. Instead of a spiritually satisfied nation, according to A. G. Dickens the condition of England even before the Henrican years was 'ripe for Reformation'. 14 After all much of Europe was buzzing with new religious ideas attacking Catholicism, especially those of Martin Luther in Germany, or even the radical secretarians, the Anabaptists in the Netherlands. According to Dickens, England 'at no time lost touch with its continental progenitors'.

The continuity of Lollardy has also been cited as evidence that anti-clericalism and the drive for religious reform had its place in England. The so-called 'morning star of the reformation' according to Foxe, Wycliffe in the fourteenth century had anticipated many of the beliefs of Protestantism, and was even responsible for the first translation of the Bible into a vernacular language. Despite his lack of success, it has been contended that much of

his influence cannot go unnoticed. In fact, Dickens again cites that Lollard persecutions actually increased from the year 1490.

In the court book at Lichfield in 1511-12 about seventy-four heretics appeared before the diocesan court. 16 Lollardy, with its distinctively English character, may well have contributed to the establishment of numerous reception areas amongst the English. Attention has also been placed on the devotion moderno, or mysticism. With its focus on a deeper and highly personal religious feeling, it may have 'took people's thoughts away from cult-observances, from the hierarchal chain of command, from the legal mechanisms and the organisations of the church'.

Certainly even if the Henrican Reformation had been imposed from above, there is little doubt that it allowed for a greater move away from tradition, and a new way of thinking to penetrate into society. Possibly the opportunity for reformers to voice their beliefs owed much to the leading classes. Certainly, had not Protestantism had the power of the state behind it, there is little to suggest it would have gone as far as it did.

In fact the Reformation, when considering 'above' as the Crown may have gone further than Henry wished it to go. As Harbison states 'even the leaders could not see where they were going'. 18 Yet once the ball had started to roll there was little turning back. Many lay-folk, in fact showed a considerable amount of resentment when Henry placed in law the class-dividing statute, which forbade 'women, artificers, journeymen, serving men under the degree of yeoman, husbandmen and labourers'¹⁹ from reading the Bible.

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This just goes to show how many people were actually taking an interest in the Bible. Protestant ideas could have been extremely attractive, as far from isolating the lay-folk from devotion it could offer the increasingly literate society²⁰, 'vernacular services, congregational singing, fuller participation in the communion, a road to salvation that did not involve centuries of purgatorial suffering, a more direct relationship to God, and a reduction in relevance to the priesthood'.¹ The real Protestant Reformation was to come in the reign of Edward. Henry had been a Catholic, and his death left the way for the Protestants to gain the upper hand. The Common Prayer Book was issued, images dismantled, church altars replaced with bare tables. This was the time when the power of the state really gave the Protestant reformation the apparatus it needed to push for reform.

It is clear that even within the reign of Henry much of the changes had been 'imposed' on the nation, albeit embraced by people with such Protestant sympathies. The Henrican Reformation had achieved a political reformation that had paved the way for a religious reformation, yet the power of the state had ensured that there was little resistance to change. The practice of people's faith, however kept much of its normality, especially as the impact of government decisions was modified by local and familiar officials.

Few of the laity were willing to have the responsibility of using their individual conscience, despite the influence of Lollardy, and the ideas that were circulating the continent, smuggled into England by merchants which nonetheless did find receptive breeding grounds. For many of the localities, however, as Haigh has suggested they continued pledging their faith in

God22 and, it might be worth adding, following the lead of their monarch.

When Michael Sherbrook asked his father why he helped despoil the local abbey of Roche in Yorkshire, he simply replied 'For I did see all would away; and there I did as other did'.