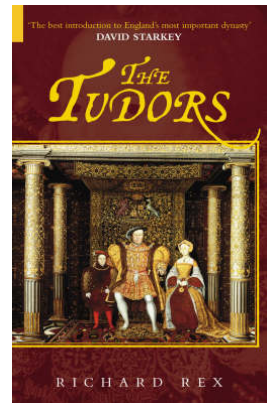


Henry VIII: A pope without catholicism, or a catholic without a pope?

Richard Rex is the author of *The Tudors*, the best introduction to that perpetually fascinating dynasty; not just my opinion, but also that of David Starkey. Rex, Reader in Reformation History at the University of Cambridge, conducted a fascinating seminar at the [Institute of Historical Research](#) last night, which looked at Henry VIII's relationship to traditional religion before the break with Rome. Rex, nominally a revisionist, took issue with G.W. Bernard's contention, outlined in his book *The King's Reformation*, that Henry was influenced by Erasmian ideas long before the break with Rome and that this sympathy made the break easier theologically for the king.

I am unconvinced by this argument and, so it emerges, is Rex, who cited numerous examples of pilgrimages, some originally unearthed by Starkey, which were undertaken by Henry before the break with Rome. Such behaviour was out of keeping with Erasmian objections to the cult of saints and Rex argued that Henry's undertakings were more than 'routine gestures of politeness'. In 1524, for example, Clement VII offered an indulgence to Henry that was dependent upon pilgrimage. Such an indulgence must have been requested by the king, or his queen, Katharine of Aragon. One could, at a pinch, argue that this was again 'conventional behaviour', but, as Rex pointed out, that too is subject to choice.

Even after the break with Rome, Henry appears to have been reticent in embracing new approaches to religion. In the 1530s, when the relic the Holy Blood of Hales was concluded to be a fraud, Hugh Latimer wrote of the king's reaction: 'what a do there was'. The cult of Henry VI, too, continued to receive considerable investment from Henry VIII: witness his financial contributions to King's College, Cambridge, well into the 1540s. Certainly, there was a great difference of opinion on theological matters within Henry's court: Cromwell may have been a zealous supporter of reform, but others were much less so. Henry became, in Diarmaid MacCulloch's description, an umpire between competing factions. We might also invoke Ian Kershaw's idea of 'working towards the leader', originally a description of the way in which leading members of the Nazi Party presented ideas to Hitler which were then dressed up as the Fuhrer's own.



Henry's religion was ultimately mechanistic, both before and after the break with Rome.

Even the publication of the King's Bible was essentially an assertion of power, argued Rex, rather than any embrace of protestantism. It could be done because the king said so, no more. Was the king a pope without catholicism, or a catholic without a pope?