

Henry VIII and Religion

Henry VIII is notorious for many things, but being very religious is not usually one of them. We might think of him as being majestic, bellicose, destructive or manipulative, but not as being particularly pious. And yet religion was one of the subjects that concerned Henry the most; he gave it perhaps more consideration than any other aspect of his reign save warfare. Religion was an integral part of his daily life and a crucial aspect of his kingship. Henry's religious policies were arguably the most far-reaching of all his innovations as ruler, and his most lasting legacy. Today, the subject of Henry VIII's religion is perhaps the most hotly contested historical aspect of his life and times.

Debating the Reformation

Henry's religion was a puzzle to his contemporaries, and has remained a source of contention ever since. The problem is that his reign coincided with the beginnings of what subsequently was termed the English Reformation. Henry's break with Rome, his institution of the Royal Supremacy, his introduction of an English Bible and the dissolution of the monasteries were all steps on the path to England's Protestant future. The question is whether Henry himself was aware of this, and whether he intended it to happen. Our understanding of the king and our understanding of the English Reformation are inextricably intertwined, and to make sense of one we have to try to make sense of the other.

We used to think that the English Reformation was a progressive movement, inevitable given the corruption of the pre-Reformation church and eagerly welcomed by the populace. Into this kind of interpretation, Henry fitted a little awkwardly, but a plausible enough case was made for him as a king broadly responsive to popular demand for change, if occasionally susceptible to reactionary pressure by conservative courtiers. This view of both Henry and the Reformation originated with John Foxe, whose 1563 *Acts and Monuments* – nearly always called the 'Book of Martyrs' – was a hugely important moment in the definition of an English Protestant identity, as well as forming the foundation of an enduring historical tradition. Unfortunately, Foxe remains far from reliable; he was not so much writing a history as a work of Protestant inspiration. He wanted to ascribe Protestant tendencies to Henry VIII, but since the facts did not really fit, he did the best he could, making the king appear sympathetic to the cause but inclined to vacillate, according to pressure from the different court factions.

A different view of the Reformation requires a different understanding of Henry VIII. If we take an opposing view to that of Foxe and the Protestant tradition, the Reformation may be seen as having little popular backing, the pre-Reformation church as being in good shape, and religious change as something imposed from above. Within such a context, Henry VIII's motivations look very different – and far less respectable. To take this 'revisionist' view of the king is to argue that his actions were not inspired by a vision – even a partial vision – of Protestant truth, but were the arbitrary acts of a man whose prime concern was his own stability and satisfaction. He broke with Rome because he wanted to get rid of Katherine of Aragon and saw no other way of doing it; he brought in an English Bible because it helped him achieve his own ends; he dissolved the monasteries because he wanted their money. This view we see as modern, associating it with the work of Jack Scarisbrick, Christopher Haigh and Eamon Duffy, but it has its roots in a view as old as that of Foxe. To quote the Elizabethan Catholic Nicholas Sanders, 'He gave up the Catholic faith for no other reason in the world than that which came from his lust and wickedness.' Henry's religious policies, from this perspective, lose any connection with actual religious belief, and appear as an exercise in greed and ambition.

Yet with either interpretation problems remain. A fundamental difficulty as we approach this complicated subject is that of hindsight, in particular a kind of theological hindsight. From the turmoil of these early years of the Reformation emerged a series of creeds – Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Zwinglian, Calvinist, in due course even Anglican – which all took great pains to define their doctrine with precision and delineate their differences from one another with passion. Yet Henry and his contemporaries fit none of these labels. In his reign, 'Catholic' still had the meaning of 'universal', and 'Protestant' was a political label referring to a small alliance of German princes. Viewed from the perspective of later religious certainties, Henry's own religion looks like an arbitrary selection of different elements. He instituted an English Bible, yet always defended the Latin Mass and its doctrine of the Real

Presence; those who denied that the bread and wine contained the body and blood of Christ were systematically persecuted throughout his reign. He rejected the papacy, yet he also rejected the central Lutheran doctrine (later upheld by Protestantism more generally) of 'justification by faith alone'. With a chilling kind of moderation, Henry VIII burned as heretics those who were too evangelical, and executed as traitors those loyal to the papacy.

For some modern commentators, the best way to understand Henry is as a mass of inconsistencies, as a man easily swayed by pressure who selected different aspects of the Christian faith under influence from wives, councillors or prospective foreign allies. Yet others find this view of Henry deeply unconvincing. Here was a man who gave forceful shape to a range of policies, and who dismissed both wives and courtiers with frightening speed when he found them inadequate. Here too was a man who gave careful thought and attention to religious policies throughout his reign. Moreover, Henry took his own religion seriously. He attended Mass on a daily basis, gave alms to the poor, celebrated holy days with great pomp and solemnity, and observed many other aspects of his religion with energy. To dismiss this as merely conventional behaviour is to miss the point, which is that Henry, as much as his subjects, believed he was appointed by God, and saw successful kingship as inseparable from pious kingship. If Henry wanted to be a great ruler, he had to be a godly ruler, because worldly success was viewed as dependent on divine favour.

The King's Reformation

Troubled by the cracks in existing interpretations of Henry and his religion, a fresh perspective has begun to emerge in recent years. This approach tries to put Henry more firmly in context. Leaving aside what the English Reformation eventually became, it looks more closely at what it was when it began. It argues that there was internal logic to Henry's convictions and policies, which made sense in the context of the 1530s when the dominant intellectual influences were still those of Renaissance, not Reformation. It suggests that Henry built upon a foundation of Christian humanism which was then the mainstream influence upon English thought, with Lutheranism still a dangerously extremist minority view. Emphasising the importance of biblical renewal, and the reform of ecclesiastical corruption, Henry propounded the most telling validation he could find for his dismissal of Katherine of Aragon and his break with Rome. This interpretation does not try to argue that Henry lacked self-interest; on the contrary, his personal and dynastic ambitions were at the root of everything he did. Nevertheless, his understanding of his own kingship required that he believe himself to be blessed by God. He needed a plausibly pious justification for his actions not only to convince his subjects, but to convince himself.

Discussions of Henry's religious motivations tend to focus on the watershed years of 1527-34, but in fact there were signs from the very beginning that Henry intended to take an interest in the English Church that was both authoritative and moralistic. Henry as a prince took delight in parading his eloquence and learning for the benefit of Erasmus, the leading humanist reformer in Europe. Once he became King, Henry employed humanist scholars such as Thomas More. He also married a woman of prodigious learning and piety, and together they patronised writers and musicians, promoted the study of Greek and Hebrew in the universities, and encouraged humanists at Court to discuss godly reform.

Christian humanism is a difficult phenomenon to define, since different scholars shaped it into different things, and those who held humanist convictions could end up dying for their Catholic faith like Thomas More and John Fisher or championing the Protestant cause like Luther, Zwingli, Thomas Cranmer or Elizabeth I. At root, however, Christian humanism was the religious aspect of the Renaissance. Where artists and sculptors sought inspiration from the classical past, those of a more religious inclination returned to the original texts of Christianity, namely the Bible, and the works of the early church fathers. Christian humanists studied Hebrew and Greek so they could read the Bible in its original form, and as they did so they discovered errors that had crept into the Latin translation used by the Church. They read the works of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Cyprian and others, and talked about reforming the church of their own day in line with their teachings. Above all, they shared a kind of excitement at their discoveries, an evangelical zeal for renewal, with particular focus on the courts of princes where, they hoped, plans for reform might be turned into reality. Henry VIII backed this movement, which was the intellectual fashion of his day, and his court was full of these new ideas.

At the same time, Henry possessed a forceful resolve to bring the Church in England under royal control. At first this was not hard to achieve, and much of what Henry wanted was secured with the help of Thomas Wolsey, Henry's Cardinal, Archbishop of York and papal legate. Wolsey controlled the church, and Henry controlled

Wolsey. When a storm arose over the extent of clerical independence in England, Henry made his stance quite clear. 'We are King of England, and the Kings of England in time past have never had any superior but God alone. Wherefore, know ye well that we will maintain the right of our Crown and of our temporal jurisdiction, as well on this point as on all others, in as ample a way as any of our progenitors have done before our time.' This statement showed not only that Henry was determined to rule the Church, but that he saw this as his ancient and ancestral right. The language of the Royal Supremacy was anticipated nearly 20 years before it took its final form.

In his first two decades as King, Henry enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with several Popes, who blessed all his enterprises. In 1521, he proudly published his book, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, or 'In Defence of the Seven Sacraments', arguing against Luther's heresies and defending the papal power which Henry had always found so convenient. The story goes that Thomas More suggested he might tone down his emphatic defence of papal primacy: a painful irony, if true. Henry refused because in 1521 it looked as though the papacy could give him everything he ever wanted, including a papal title of *Fidei Defensor*, or 'Defender of the Faith', which with yet more irony is still carried by the English monarch to this day.

It is important to understand how, when Henry began to want rid of Katherine of Aragon, he explained the position to himself, as well as others. He might have asked for a divorce on more simple grounds but instead he tried to argue that the marriage had been invalid from the first, because of a prohibition in the Bible against marrying a brother's wife. To appeal to the Bible in this way marked Henry out as a humanist, at the cutting edge of intellectual fashion. It also meant that his argument had huge ramifications for the question of papal authority. If religious questions could be decided by the Bible, the primacy of the Pope was in question. Henry does not seem to have seen this clearly from the very first, but as the years passed, and the struggle for the divorce went on, he did see the implications and, moreover, he began to like the look of them.

When Henry had written his book against Luther, he had employed a group of humanist scholars to provide him with the necessary backing. Now an even bigger research project got under way, with humanist scholars drafted in to demonstrate the invalidity of the King's first marriage, and to find historical and biblical reasons why the King, not the Pope, should rule the English Church. Confusingly, of course, those who were defending Katherine of Aragon's legitimacy as Queen and the authority of the Pope were also humanists, also deeply steeped in patristic and classical learning, and careful scholars of the Bible. Henry put the full weight of royal patronage behind those who were arguing his side of the case; he also sent representatives around the universities of Europe to secure a judgement on his side.

Behind these intellectual developments lurked some crude realities. Katherine was old, incapable of bearing Henry a son. Anne Boleyn was young enough, and the King was passionately in love with her. Even at this level, however, the King's desires were not entirely selfish. His longing for a son was not a personal whim, it was an urgent political necessity. Henry's own father had only just managed to contain the dynastic tensions which had seen 15th-century England torn apart by civil war. Henry VIII knew only too well that his father's claim to the throne had been far from obvious, and the brutal way in which he himself dealt with any possible challenges to his authority betrays nervousness on this score. Were he to leave the throne with no clear successor, the chances were high that the 'Wars of the Roses' would be renewed. If Henry VIII battled ceaselessly to secure the son he needed, there was a very good political reason for doing so.

Pope Clement VII was not unsympathetic to Henry's difficulties, but he was a virtual prisoner of Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, who was nephew to Katherine of Aragon. In 1532, therefore, Henry was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he had no choice but to sever links with Rome, take command of the Church himself, declare his marriage to Katherine invalid, and marry Anne. This indeed was what he did, securing the compliance of the political nation by enacting the Royal Supremacy in Parliament, and setting the seal on his achievements by crowning Anne Boleyn – by this time heavily pregnant – as Queen in June 1533. The birth of Elizabeth, rather than the expected prince, in September 1533, was another piece of historical irony. Yet in due course Anne Boleyn would also fall victim to necessity – executed to make way for her successor, Jane Seymour, who finally produced the desired male child nearly 30 years after Henry had first started hoping for one.

The rest of Henry's reign saw the emphatic and unyielding imposition of the Royal Supremacy, which was a point on which the King refused to give any ground, and for which many of his subjects went to their deaths. What

happened to religious belief and practice was less emphatic, and more convoluted, but also a lot more interesting. By this time, the idea of himself as a godly reformer, a king who answered directly to God, had become deeply embedded in Henry's own notions of kingship. It had become a part of his identity, reinforced by the imagery surrounding him. In public, he portrayed himself as the man who had banished corruption from the Church and restored the truth of the Bible. But in private too, as we can see from his book of psalms, he saw himself as King David, the Old Testament king who had slain the Goliath of papal corruption. The illustrations depicting David show him in Henry's own unmistakable costume.

A Moderate Church

Once the break with Rome was established, Henry set about reforming the Church that had come under his jurisdiction. With hindsight, what he did does not seem consistent. The English Bible, the Dissolution, the destruction of images – all these look Protestant. Yet the defence of the Latin Mass, the upholding of the seven sacraments, the burning of Protestant heretics at the stake – all these appear Catholic in emphasis. To take a step back, however, to a time before the Reformation identities of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' had solidified, is to understand how Henry's policies had a kind of coherence all their own. He had based his Supremacy upon the Bible, therefore an English Bible was a necessity in every parish church. He had modelled himself upon the Old Testament kings who had attacked idolatry, therefore images which had been worshipped were destroyed (although those which had not been wrongly used were left to instruct the illiterate). He saw the monasteries as likely to bear allegiance to Rome (which was indeed often the case) and as dens of iniquity (which was also sometimes true), so he abolished them. He considered Lutheran doctrine, with the eager encouragement of some of his advisors, who were persuaded by the new ideas, but then rejected it. He allowed some 'modernisation' of Catholic tradition, such as restricting the excessive number of saints' days and providing a litany in English, but what he regarded as the central core of Catholic belief remained unchanged, namely the sacramental doctrine and, in particular, the beliefs and practices of the Mass. Oddly enough, for this most immoderate of men, his religious policy was an attempt at doctrinal moderation.

If we consider the various official formulations of his reign, we begin to see the argument for coherence emerge. It used to be common practice, for example, to classify the Ten Articles of 1536 as 'Protestant' and the Act of Six Articles from 1539 as the basis of a 'Catholic reaction'. If we look more closely, however, both appear to be Henry seeking to define his own form of church reform amid conflicting advice and pressure from all sides. He seems to have aimed at a 'Henrician Reformation' which was neither Protestant nor straightforwardly Catholic: a distinctive kind of Catholic reformation. The Ten Articles showed the influence of recent negotiations with the Lutherans, but this influence was far from decisive. They use language which is clearly reformist, both in terms of doctrines of salvation and the sacraments, and in terms of reforming superstitious practices concerning images, but they do not promote Lutheran doctrine. Meanwhile the Six Articles assert key aspects of Catholic belief and practice, such as clerical celibacy and the Real Presence in the Eucharist. The Ten Articles are more reformed in their language; the Six Articles are more conservative, a mark of Henry's alarm that his subjects had taken his Royal Supremacy as an excuse for advancing into what he saw as heresy. Yet the Six Articles do not in any way contradict or reverse the Ten Articles. Taken together, they express the two sides of Henrician reform: cautiously evangelical in tone, but on certain central matters of faith and salvation firmly traditional.

Few people understood what Henry was trying to achieve whilst he was alive. Many Catholics were appalled by the rejection of the papacy, and a few, like Thomas More, were far-sighted enough to see that Catholic doctrine would not long survive without obedience to the Pope as the linchpin of church unity. Even those Catholics who appreciated Erasmian reform ideas were shocked by the savagery of the king's methods, his merciless treatment of his opponents and the aggressive self-aggrandisement of the Royal Supremacy. His aims may have been moderate, but his methods were brutal. Meanwhile those who were attracted by the ideas of Luther or Zwingli hoped – like Cranmer and Cromwell – that the king might be led along the path towards Protestantism. Their publication of the 'Bishops' Book' in 1537, without the king's official sanction, showed how far they wanted to take these religious reforms. Repeatedly their hopes were dashed. Henry, when he had found time to finally read it, ordered a more conservative revision of the 'Bishops' Book', which appeared in 1543, appropriately enough always known as 'the King's Book'. To the very end Henry was determined to stay in control of the Reformation he had unleashed.

Conclusion

The different religious groups surrounding the king never understood the heart of Henry's religion. For Henry, the Royal Supremacy was as much about the King as it was about God, and questions of doctrine and church tradition were inseparable from an understanding of his divinely-ordained kingship. Contemporaries for whom purely religious considerations came first, like later commentators concerned with theological consequences, all failed to grasp the central truth of the Henrician Reformation. Perhaps the best illustration of Henry's religion was given by the title-page of the English Bible, the 'Great Bible' of 1539 which was the first officially authorized English translation of Scripture. Henry was depicted enthroned, handing out copies of the Bible to the clergy on one side, the laity on the other. Further down the page, we see the Word of God being expounded from the pulpit on one side, and discussed by gentlemen on the other side. At the bottom, ordinary folk listen to the Bible being preached. Their response is to shout out an acclamation, but not – as one might expect – to God, but to Henry. They cry out 'Vivat Rex!' and 'Long Live the King!' The picture of Henry at the head of the page evokes Christ in Majesty. For Henry, the authority of God and the authority of the King had all but merged: obedience to one required obedience to the other. Henry VIII had not so much rejected the Pope as taken his place. Neither religion nor politics in England would ever be the same again.

Issues to Debate

- To what extent was Henry VIII swayed by evangelical and conservative factions, to what extent did he decide his own religious policies?
- What was the relationship between Henry's religious understanding and his view of kingship?
- Was there anything 'Protestant' about the Henrician Reformation, or was it chiefly motivated by ideas of Catholic reform?

Further Reading

- G.W. Bernard, 'The Making of Religious Policy, 1533-1546: Henry VIII and the Search for the "Middle Way"', *Historical Journal*, 41 (1998)
- P. Collinson, 'Truth and Legend: the veracity of John Foxe's Book of Martyrs', in *Elizabethan Essays* (1994)
- P. Marshall, *Reformation England 1480-1642* (2003)
- R. Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (1993)
- J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (1984)
- L. Wooding, *Henry VIII* (2008)

Lucy Wooding is a lecturer in history at King's College London.